

STONE  FIELD

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*For Alexandria Juliet Lenzi,
the first person who ever asked
me to please tell her a story*



1



I'M A LOADED GUN.

Henry knows. He thinks he and Jesus can save me from myself.

“Catrina, what you want is discipline.” Henry pushes aside the new issue of *Farmers’ Almanac* on the breakfast table instead of picking it up like usual, to show the gravity of the situation. “I know you were wasting time daydreaming in the woods yesterday and up in the cave again last night.”

If he knew I wasn’t daydreaming, but creating my wild work in the woods, it wouldn’t make any difference. He’d still call it a waste of time.

“If Father won’t tend to you, somebody has to. Whoever heard of a girl roaming up and down the hills at all hours? Look at you—wearing boys’ pants and your hair hanging loose and tangled. It’s not proper.”

I don’t give a damn about being proper. It’s just a mess of rules that people make up so they can have a say in other people’s business. But I don’t waste my words on Henry. I tear

off pieces of my biscuit and crumble them in my fist while he preaches his sermon. Since Papa's off working in the barn, I'm the only one left in Henry's congregation.

He crosses his arms over his chest, looking at me like I'm dirt on a stick. If the high slant of his cheekbones and the soft curve of his lips didn't belong to our dead mother, I would slap his face. Mother had never minded what I wore and would never have talked to me this way.

"Plenty of girls are courted or already married at seventeen, but there's not a man in his right mind who'd want to chase down and tame a wildcat like you. You should be here at home." He tilts his chin up as he talks so the righteousness he spouts will fall on me like manna from Heaven. "When you feel troubled or restless, you should turn your idle thoughts to the Bible and your idle hands to work. That'll sweep the wickedness out of any girl's heart." He nods, agreeing with himself.

But Henry and Jesus don't know a thing about a girl's heart. And they don't know what it feels like to have a soul bent on wandering through dark places, looking for the missing piece of itself. They can't help me.

"You'll stay home today and set your mind toward improvement." Mistaking my silence for acceptance, Henry opens the *Almanac* and shuts the invisible door between us. He doesn't realize his words are bullets dropping into the barrel of my soul. I wonder what he'll do if someone pulls the trigger.

Henry didn't always treat me like the enemy. Less than a year ago, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States, and Mother left the land of the living. That's when Henry

pulled away from me and Papa, just like the southern states drew away from the Union. Last year, the old Henry had a bright look on his face when I showed him the new weather vane I designed for our barn. Instead of making a horse or a rooster, I made two naked wind nymphs soaring on the breeze, their wings outstretched. Back then Henry didn't call me wicked—he called me clever. Seems ages and ages ago.

I make a decision. If Henry glances at me over the top of the *Almanac*, I'll smile at him. If he lowers the *Almanac* and smiles too, then that means there's a chance we can find our way back to how we used to be before Mother died. I stare hard at the cover of the *Almanac* and chant inside my head, *Look at me, look at me, look at me*. I don't take my eyes away from him so I won't miss my chance. But Henry's already forgotten about me. He finishes his coffee, biscuits, and molasses without glancing up.

"I'm traveling to Rolla today to get the papers and see how things are. We should be hearing more about the battle at Lexington by now. Damned Confederates and their Missouri Guard—they're ripping the state in half. And not a hundred miles northwest of Roubidoux Hollow!" He slaps the *Almanac* down as he shoves away from the table. Dirty dishes are women's work.

Right now I'd rather jump off a cliff than scrape another plate, churn another tub of butter, or scrub one more load of wash. A lump grows in my throat and I can hardly swallow. When the back door shuts behind Henry, I stretch my arm across the table and slide it over the surface in a great wave. The wave pushes the *Almanac* and the clattering tin plates and cups over

the edge like God sweeping the Egyptians into the Red Sea. They tumble to the floor with a crash. I step over them and out the door. By the time Henry gets a quarter of the way to Rolla, I'll be sitting on top of the world in a place where dishes, Bibles, and battles don't exist.



The fresh scent of rain and wet cedar fills the air from a late-night shower that scrubbed the earth clean. It's September, that twilight month between the heat of summer and the chill of autumn. In my mind I think of it like Missouri, the hazy border between the northern and southern states. They are uncertain, in-between times and places that aren't quite one thing or the other. Yet.

I part the bushes at the edge of the ravine, and a small flock of thistle birds takes flight. The flutter of their wings sets the pace of my heart. A rush of cold dank air from the cleft in the rock lifts the hairs on my arms and finds its way under my clothes like icy fingers. I shiver and close my eyes, imagining the lonesome spirit of a dead man sliding its hands over my body, beckoning me inside the cave like a long-lost lover. The rim of the cave is as high as my hips, but I pull myself up easy without any fool skirts to tangle my legs.

The cave's main tunnel is long and winding and leads to my secret place, a small opening high in the bluff overlooking Roubidoux Hollow. Henry doesn't understand the darkness that settles over me, and why I need to come here, but Papa

does. When Papa needs to escape his pain, he locks himself in his study with the books Mr. Lenox orders for him—they come all the way from St. Louis. Most people in Roubidoux only read if they have to—the *Almanac*, the newspaper, or the Bible sometimes—but Papa has always had his stories and poetry, and I have my tunnel to the sky.

Henry doesn't open Papa's books or climb into my cave to learn where it goes because he doesn't own the patience or curiosity for it. Not anymore, anyway. Ever since Mother died, he doesn't like to think too hard about anything he doesn't understand. If he can't wrap his mind around an idea in a heartbeat or see all there is to see of a thing in a glance, he can't abide it. That's why he's turned cold toward me—he knows I'm a quiet cave with secret tunnels and open rooms beneath my stone face—dark places he doesn't want to find. And Lord, how I want to be found. I ache for it. But not by a coward like Henry. I want someone who will climb right into me and explore every inch, knowing they might never find their way out.

I breathe in the smell of cool wet rock and mud as I crawl in the dark to my secret place. Nobody knows about it but me. Well, a couple years ago, Frank Louis, who's older than me and mean enough to bite himself, followed me to the cave opening without me knowing. But I threw rocks at him and he ran away bleeding. Now I make sure nobody follows me.

I creep up through the muck and mire till I see a blue spot of shining sky. When I reach the opening on the edge of the high bluff, I lean against the damp wall of the tunnel. No one

can see me way up here. Cold water drips from the top ledge onto my eyelid and slides down my cheek.

The gray snaky curves of Roubidoux Creek glint silver as the sun climbs over the hills. The stream winds around the slope of Hudgens Cemetery and slips through our cedar grove toward Stone Field where our sorghum cane grows.

But I don't look at the grove or the field. Today I see only the cemetery.

My eyes linger on Mother's small mound of earth. Last night when I went there, a silver-dollar moon floated over the graveyard, casting black shadows and blue light around her grave marker. I considered getting a shovel and digging a tunnel down to her coffin. I wanted to break it open and crawl in beside her like I used to climb into her bed after I had a bad dream. Even though her arms are cold and stiff now, I still want them around me. I want to believe she forgives me for being the one who killed her. Papa says it was an accident. But I was still the cause of it. That was the day my darkness settled over me.

I thought about throwing myself in the ground with her. But it wasn't the fear of going down into the grave that kept me from getting the shovel—I was afraid I might decide to never come back up. And I don't want to break what's left of Papa's heart.

Soon the worms that have slipped into her coffin will chew her body into dirt. I imagine them crawling through her crow-colored hair that looks like mine and eating away her lovely skin that was once smooth and white as a new-laid egg. My friend Effie Lenox thinks I shouldn't say such things. I said, if the truth

is wrong then what the hell is right? Effie thinks I should imagine Mother in the next world, Heaven, dancing around on streets of gold. I love Effie and know she's sharp as needles, but that's bull.

When I die, I'd rather wake up here inside this world, become a part of it like the roots of the black walnut trees. Like the wild pawpaws and persimmons with their sweet smell as they rot in the ground, turning back into dirt, becoming something different, something new. I'd be the creek water that changes into mist and lingers in the hills, then rains on the fields, trickling down into the cracks where all the seeds hide. I don't want to leave this world. I want to go deeper into it.

Two hawks swoop over the rocky ledge above. They call to each other like old friends or lovers and glide in circles together over the valley, picking out their breakfast down below. Their hungry cries pierce me near the heart in the spot behind my ribs where my loneliness festers. Watching them soar side by side makes the wound throb, and I screech my own wild birdcall into the sky. It ricochets off the hills.

Then, down below in Stone Field, someone returns my birdcall. I about jump out of my skin. When I look toward the sorghum crop, my heart stops beating. I forget how to breathe. I'm struck like a slap to the cheek when I see the field.

I blink, but it's not my imagination. Great swirling lines curve and spiral through the rows of stalks as if God's played a boys' game, drawing giant circles in the cane field with His finger. The design stretches across five acres as if it were meant to be seen from somewhere up high. It's beautiful and terrible

at the same time. I wonder—did I make it myself when my mind was too dark last night to think straight? I don't think so. What does it mean?

My breath escapes me. A stranger sits on the black boulder in the middle of Stone Field, surrounded by cane. He's naked as Adam and Eve. And he's staring straight at me.

2



OUR DOG NAPOLEON STARTS BARKING FROM THE edge of the cane, warning Papa about the man in the field. Soon all our dogs join in. Their urgent voices bounce off the hills and crisscross over the hollow, howling for Papa to get his gun.

No.

I scurry back through the tunnel like a mole on fire. But the cave floor is slick, and I fall flat on my stomach, scraping the side of my head against the wall. I push the hair out of my face with my wet hands and crawl the rest of the way out. I race toward the field. Mud coats me like a second skin, drying and cracking as I run. I push myself faster so I can get there before Papa finds out what the stranger did and shoots him dead.

But when I round the hill, Papa's already standing in front of the field, ramming black powder and a bullet down the barrel of his gun. The stalks are too high for him to know about the crop design. He sees only a gap in the rows like a path entrance cut into the cane. He steps into the opening.

“Papa.”

He glances over his shoulder. “Where’ve you been, Cat? Looks like the dogs dragged you under the porch.”

“There’s a man in Stone Field.”

Papa pulls the hammer half-cocked and slips the cap into place.

I keep walking, hoping I can get ahead of him, into the gap. “But he doesn’t need shooting—he needs dressing. And feeding, most likely.”

Papa pauses as he holds the rifle. “I’ll take care of this, Catrina. Get to the house.”

“I can’t.” Something pulls me to the center of the field like iron to lodestone. I push the barrel of Papa’s gun aside and pass by him, but at the last second, I grab it from his hands and run ahead of him into the narrow maze.

“Damn it, Cat!” Papa barks like the dogs at his heels. “Careful!” His heavy footsteps follow me into the gap.

The path is smoother than I thought. Padded. The stalks haven’t been cut or removed, just bent near the bottom and pressed to the ground. The man didn’t destroy any of Papa’s cane. A path splits off to the left, but I keep going. I imagine myself moving through the design I saw from the bluff. Papa’s footsteps hesitate behind me at the division, and I push my legs faster, trying to reach the bend ahead. As soon as it curves, a narrow branch splits off to the right and I take it.

My heart beats my blood so hard it comes thumping on my eardrums begging for mercy. The sharp blades of the cane slash my face and arms, but I keep running. Napoleon leads the other

dogs to follow Papa past the split, away from me. They're headed into a spiraling circle. His curses ring out from the northwest corner of the field when he realizes it's a dead end, but I'm almost to the black rock in the center of Stone Field.

I slow down when I hear singing. It comes from up ahead—a deep rumbly voice:

*“Come, live with me and be my love
And we will all the pleasures prove
And if these pleasures me thee move
Then live with me and be my love.”*

The tune's strange, but I've read those words somewhere before, in one of Papa's books. His low voice sends a chill curling up my spine like a snake slithering up a pole.

I stop walking and peer through the stalks, straining for a glimpse of the stranger. For a moment I think I see him, his head and shoulders above the tall cane only a dozen paces away. I stumble several steps before I realize it's only the scarecrow that Henry put up last March.

*“There will I make thee beds of roses
With a thousand fragrant posies
A cap of flowers and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.”*

As soon as I round the bend, I see him—a madman, sure as I'm born. He's naked and pacing around the rock like a restless

mountain cat. I never saw a man with no clothes on before, and I can't stop staring at the parts of him I'm not supposed to see. He doesn't seem to notice. But even the parts of him that aren't private, like the place where the line of his neck turns into the slope of his shoulders, look like holy things that only gods and angels should be allowed to look at. I've never seen anyone as beautiful as him.

He's not much older than me. Little leaves twine through his black tangled hair, which hangs in his face and covers the back of his neck. His skin's neither pale like mine, nor midnight black like Effie's. He's dark but golden, like a copperhead glistening in the sun. I want to touch his sleek skin to feel if it's hot or cold. I want to see if he'll strike me like a snake. Lord, I'm mad as he is.

The stranger's voice rumbles like wheels on a gravelly road, traveling straight to me.

*"A belt of straw and ivy buds
With coral clasps and amber studs
With gray feather of the dove
Oh, live with me and be my love."*

He stops singing and turns his head toward me. I look up quick from glancing at his private parts, and his wild eyes meet mine. They speak a foreign language, but I understand it clear as day—they can see straight through me to the inside. They tell me I'm more naked than he is and the secret things inside my heart are showing.

The shock of it sends a thrill through my body that feels like both pleasure and fear. I've always wanted someone to look at me that way, but I never knew it might be so dangerous. My fingers remember the gun they clutch. The little hairs on my neck lift the way they do when there are lightning charges in the air from an approaching storm, but the sky is cloudless. I raise the rifle and point it at the madman's chest. "Who the hell are you?"

He doesn't blink. He steps forward, as if the gun's an invitation, not a warning, and stands five paces from me. "We know what we are, but know not what we may be."

I've read those words—Ophelia says them in Papa's copy of *Hamlet*. My thoughts spin like a weather vane, and I can't tell which way the danger's coming from—him or me. I place my thumb on the half-cocked hammer. "I don't know what you are." I pull the hammer all the way back till it clicks. "But I know you may be a dead man mighty easy."

My heart pounds. Ophelia went mad and killed herself—she walked right into the river. I know how it feels to want something like that, wanting to walk right out of your troubles, to walk right out of your life. Is that what this stranger wants—to walk into my bullet? My fingers shake. I don't want to shoot him, I just want him to come closer to me like he did when I first raised the gun.

He does.

He steps so near to me that one shot would blow his troubled heart clean out of him. His eyes are deep water. Lord. I can see myself in them. Something makes me quiver as if an invisible

spirit's running its fingers across my soul. My arms tremble, the rifle shakes in my hands. I'm not afraid of him anymore, I'm afraid of me. I want to put the gun down, but my fingers have clenched up tight and won't work.

"Catrina, put the gun down!"

Papa's voice strikes me like a bolt of lightning, and I feel like I'm exploding. But it's the gun in my hands, firing with a loud *crack* that splits the sky and echoes across the hollow. *Oh God.* My fingers turn numb, like they don't even belong to me, and the rifle slips away, falling to the ground with a soft thud. The smell of burnt sulfur fills the air. Black smoke hangs like a curtain between me and the stranger. As the smoke rises, the man sinks to his knees, his beautiful body crumpling at my feet like a dropped handkerchief.

In my stomach, a stone falls. Its weight drops me to the ground beside the madman. He's so near, I can smell the salt and sun of his body. I stare at his eyes. I saw myself in them, but now they've rolled back in his head, showing only the whites. Did I kill him? My hand shakes as I reach out to touch his face.

His golden skin burns hot as hellfire. Or is it mine? I can't tell the difference between us.

Papa kneels beside me.

"I didn't mean to—" My throat swells up.

"I know, Cat, I know." Papa's breath comes fast as his big hands travel over the hills and hollows of the man's muscles and joints, searching out the wound. "He ain't shot." It sounds more like a question. He says it again, stronger, to feel the truth of it better. "He ain't shot."

I didn't kill him. My body goes limp and shaky. I didn't kill him.

"Poor fellow. He's no thief—it's a mad fever that's got ahold of him. He's burning up." Papa shakes his head. "I'll get him to the house and you take the mule to fetch Effie Lenox to come doctor him."

"I won't."

"Cat—"

"I'll tend him myself." I don't care if Henry gets mad at me for disobeying or not being proper. I don't care about anything except saving the man I found in Stone Field. When I thought I killed him, it was like seeing Mother dead on the ground by the molasses press. If I can fill him back up with life, he can fill me up too—I know it in my bones. He won't have to die like Mother. And neither will I.

I glance up at the hawks, still circling together above the bluff. "Don't try to stop me. I want to be with him."

3



PAPA DOESN'T TRY TO STOP ME, BUT AS SOON AS WE lay the man on the cot in his study and he covers him up so I won't see him naked anymore, Papa still runs off to fetch Effie. I start brewing some willow bark tea, using Mother's recipe for Fever Cure that's always helped Papa in his bouts of throat sickness. While the tea boils, I wash the stranger's burning face and neck with cool water from the well and prop his head up with a pillow. I pull Papa's reading chair up next to the cot and stare at the man from Stone Field.

The leaves in his hair make me think of Puck, the sprite from Papa's Shakespeare. But he doesn't look like a pesky little nature spirit. He looks strong and human. And handsome as the Devil. More like King Nebuchadnezzar from the Bible, who went crazy and wandered around naked in the wilderness like an animal because God got mad at him. Maybe God was jealous.

I pick the leaves out of his hair one by one, and stick them into mine like a wreath around my head as I cool his face again

with the water. After I strain and cool the tea, I dip a clean rag in it and squeeze the drops between his lips. He's quiet and still as a dead man and it makes me all-overish. I grab Papa's pipe and pace the floor as I fill it with tobacco and light it with a stick from the stove. Papa used to try to keep me from smoking, but he knows it helps calm me when my darkness settles over my moods, so now he lets me be. I puff on the pipe as I scan the shelves for *Hamlet*.

The cover's worn soft from Papa's fingers. I sit down close to the Stone Field man with my knees up against his bed and look for the words he spoke to me in the cane. *We know what we are, but know not what we may be*. I blow a smoke ring toward him. His face fits perfectly inside the white round frame, just like a tintype photograph. I wish I could slip his image into the deep pocket of my trousers where I keep things I might need one day. The rings begin to fade as the smoke fills the space between us.

Damn it, God, don't you let him die. I pull and puff more smoke and read out loud the line I already know by heart. " 'To be, or not to be—' "

A low voice rumbles, " 'That is the question.' "

I can't see him through the smoke, but as it fades away, his image slowly appears. He opens his eyes and blinks at me. His eyes are the golden brown of barley ale, sweet molasses, dark honey. "I saw you." His voice is dry and rough like a croaking frog's. "In the cliff. You looked like a bird ready to fly away. I didn't want you to leave."

My hand shakes as I dip the rag in the cold water and squeeze

him a drink. He's going to live. He has to. The man's eyes don't leave me once. They still have a glassy fire and look lit up from the inside. The fever's still got him. As I give him water, his hot lips brush against my fingers and make everything inside me shake and rattle like a tornado coming. "Who are you?" I ask.

"I don't know, yet."

"Well, what's your name?"

His eyes scrunch up and he holds his head like it hurts to think. "I don't recall it. I don't recall a thing."

When the fever took him, it must have stolen his memory. But he remembers seeing me up in the cliff. I take another puff on the pipe and stare at him.

He blinks at me, and then props himself up on his elbow. "Who are *you*?" He stares at me strong and steady, like I'm the one who's the mystery, and he's the one to solve me. Lord. Maybe he is.

I glance out the window, not knowing how to answer. "Why did you make the circles in the cane?"

"So you'd look at them." He speaks slow, like he's trying to find the words. "I saw you up there . . . yesterday? I think it was yesterday—I'm not certain. It took me all night. The moon helped." He reaches out and takes the pipe from my hand. I feel a tiny charge of lightning when his fingers brush against mine. He puts the pipe in his mouth and takes a long pull. When he blows smoke rings, it looks like he's kissing the air between us. Soon it's full of swirls and spirals like the ones in Stone Field.

I take the pipe back. "You should rest."

“But what if I wake up and find out I only dreamed you and you’re not real?”

My face feels strange when I smile—it’s been so long, I’m surprised I remember how. “If I’m not real, then poor me.” A leaf slips from my hair and falls into my lap.

He picks it up and tucks it back into my hair. “It’d be a poor situation for us both. I’d just have to go back to sleep and keep dreaming.” His smile is slow like deep water with a current so strong it pulls me right under. Everything in the world disappears except for him and me, and even when our words are gone, his eyes still speak.

His lips don’t move, but I hear his rumbly voice in my head saying, *If the question’s “to be or not to be,” then the answer’s “to be.” As long as it’s to be here, with you.*

My heart beats faster. His voice is in my head so strong, saying the exact same thing his eyes are telling me. I know it’s him talking silent to me, and not my mind making things up. He wants to be with me, and I nod because I feel the same way.

His eyes get heavy and I know he needs resting. “Go to sleep. Let the Fever Cure work on you. You’ll need to sleep ages, but when it’s done with its work, you’ll be all right.” I reach out and squeeze his hand so what I said feels true and certain for him and for me, too. His eyes slide shut, but his smile stays put.

I hold his hand and gaze at the smooth golden skin of his arms and chest until I hear Papa and Effie ride up outside, and then I slide away to meet them on the porch. Papa looks worried and lost, but Effie’s clutching her bag of fancy medicines

that she won't even need, now, and has that look of determination she always wears.

"Effie, he's asleep. We should let him rest. I gave him Mother's Fever Cure—that's all he needs for now."

She nods, but I know she won't be at ease until she's set eyes on him and decided what's what. I move aside and let her into the house. "Well, he's in the study if you want to see for yourself. But don't wake him."

Papa and I follow her through the house. The heels of her boots click like a timepiece against the wood floor. Wherever Effie is, without even saying a word, she makes people feel like she's in charge, and she's only twenty—three years older than me—and black as the slaves who live beyond the hills of Roubidoux. She marches right up to the man and feels his forehead. He doesn't move a smidgen, and keeps sleeping.

She clucks like a hen as she pulls the blanket back up over his naked chest and feels the sides of his neck, under his chin.

"His fever's still dangerously high. His glands are slightly swollen, too. We'll have to be diligent to keep his temperature lowered through the night, but if we can, he'll be fine, Lord willing."

I nod. Effie Lenox is the smartest person I know. She talks just like a book and she showed me how to read and write when I was five and she was eight. She's the one who got Papa interested in reading her father's library full of novels and poetry.

She's read the thick doctoring books that Mr. Lenox orders for her, cover to cover. If God had made Effie a man and given her paler skin, she'd have gone off to a fancy school to be a real

doctor, sure as I'm sitting here. But even God can't stop Effie from learning more about doctoring than Him, if she sets her mind to it.

She's an expert on being proper and good, too, because her papa, Mr. Lenox, was a missionary. He met and married Effie's mama in the Congo, but the woman died there, giving birth to Effie's little sister. Mr. Lenox is white as paste, but Mrs. Lenox had the same curly hair and black skin as Effie—her tintype's inside the locket that's hanging from Effie's neck, dangling over the Stone Field man.

"Hm." Effie peers at the man. "He looks as though he might be Mexican or perhaps Indian. In either case, I imagine he's far from friends and family." She holds her locket between her fingers with an anxious look on her face. "I hope he's able to leave soon and join them again. People here in Roubidoux won't know what to make of him and that may mean trouble for—"

I snort. "I don't give a damn what they—"

"My goodness!" Effie lifts the pan of Fever Cure I made. "What an odd concoction."

Lord, I hate when she interrupts me and changes the subject for no reason.

She sniffs the brew. "You come up with the strangest tonics, Catrina."

I cross my arms proud over my chest and sit back in the chair to smoke some more. "Well, who cares if it's your expensive store-bought pills or a witch's brew, as long as it makes him well?"

Stone Field man's eyes flutter open. For a moment, he smiles

at me as if he heard what I said, and then his eyes slide shut again. Papa and Effie didn't even see. It makes me laugh out loud.

"Catrina Dickinson." Effie shakes her head and almost smiles. "You *are* a witchy girl—you think it's funny, carrying a strange man who wore next to nothing in from the field—"

"It wasn't 'next to nothing'—he was bare naked. And Papa helped me. Stonefield was too heavy for me to carry on my own or I would have done it."

"Stonefield?" Papa and Effie say it at the same time.

"He lost his name somewhere in the field. Maybe he can borrow that one till he finds his memory."

Stonefield mumbles, "I like it."

Effie looks at him like she smells a skunk, but Papa beams when he hears Stonefield's voice. I swear I never loved Papa more than I do right now. He smiles and pats the man on the shoulder. "Good to meet you, Stonefield. You can stay with us as long as you like."

Stonefield's eyes open again, looking past Papa and Effie at me for just a moment before his breathing turns heavy with sleep. And in that moment the look on his face lights up the whole world, like when lightning strikes at night turning everything clear as day. I could almost forget what my darkness feels like. And I'm so happy, I hardly even think about what Henry will do when he finds out.

4



STONEFIELD SLEEPS ALL DAY WITHOUT WAKING AS Effie and I keep his temperature lowered by changing the cloth on his head and bathing his arms and chest in cool water. Effie handles his body as if he's just an ordinary person with ordinary skin and muscles like you see every day. Doesn't she notice the strange weight of his arm in her fingers? It feels smooth as water and firm as stone at the same time. I'm surprised she can't sense the strength bottled up inside his shoulders. I feel a quiet power resting inside every muscle my hand brushes.

Every couple hours I give him another dose of Fever Cure. Finally, by late afternoon his fever breaks. Lord. Looks like God finally went and did something right. When Stonefield wakes and sits up with his dark hair ruffled and his eyes all sleepy, I want to reach out toward him, but Effie's watching, so I just speak to him in my head, without using my voice.

Stonefield, you fought the fever off. You came back to the Land of the Living.

He looks at me like he sees something written on my eyes, like he's reading words there.

I had to come back—you're here.

He heard me talking with him in his head, too. I'm certain it's real. Hearing him this way is a quicker path to my heart than hearing through the ears. His voice shoots straight to the center of me like an arrow.

Effie adjusts his pillow. "I've brought you some broth—it will help your strength return. All you need is some rest and you'll be perfectly fine."

I reach for the bowl. "I'll do it."

Effie says, "Catrina, you need to rest, too. You look . . . rumped."

She glances at the mud still caked in my hair and on my clothes. I washed my hands and face, earlier, but I don't have time for a bath. I take the bowl from her before she can sit down beside him.

"I think I know better than you when I need resting and when I need to keep on doing a thing."

Effie rolls her eyes as I sit down and start feeding him, but I just mind Stonefield. I like the way he leans in slow toward the spoon and takes it in his mouth as he looks steady at me. I don't know why, but every time I slide the spoon from his lips and he swallows, it sends my heart a-quivering.

As Stonefield finishes the broth, Papa walks through the door. He left earlier for the field to see what could be done about the bent stalks. When he sees Stonefield's well enough to eat, he nods and grins. Papa always says thousands more with his

smile than he does with his words, and I know he's relieved to see that Stonefield's going to be all right. When Papa saw him lying like a dead person in the field, it must have flooded him with memories of finding Mother that way. All those painful thoughts gathered again over Stonefield. But now that he's alive and safe, it's like Stonefield saved Papa, not the other way around.

Stonefield starts looking sleepy again and lies back against his pillow. Papa shoos me and Effie from the study. "So the boy can sleep and the man can read in peace."

I don't think Papa even hears Henry's horse and wagon tearing into the yard a couple hours later. I jump up from the sitting room floor where I started dozing off while Effie read Proverbs out loud from the Bible like she does sometimes when she visits, because she knows I skip those whenever I read the Good Book.

When Henry walks through the front door, he's madder than hornets. "Damned insurrectionists won the battle! The Union troops retreated—they're headed back to Fort Rolla as we speak. The whole nation's going to Hell." He throws the newspapers into the fire. I stare at them burning, the words curling up and melting. Henry always saves the papers so when we're done reading them we can stuff them in the walls for insulation or use them to cut sewing patterns.

"And have you seen Stone Field?" He wrings his hat like a dish towel. "Some kind of fool's been playing tricks in our sorghum. Looks like the work of a lunatic!"

I nod and glance at Effie, who's sitting quiet in the corner

rocking chair, listening, with the Bible open on her lap. Henry's so worked up he hasn't even noticed she's behind him.

He keeps going. "Bill Hoss was shooting rabbits up on his oak knoll this morning and saw the circles in our cane all the way from there. He rode down to tell me when he saw me coming home just now. Said it looked like the Devil's work, and now everyone around thinks our farm's been marked with an evil sign." His voice rises like it's climbing a mountain, getting higher and higher as he goes.

I know when he reaches the top he'll blow. I move to the window and sit on the sill with one leg in the house and the other outside so I can get away quick. But that only makes him madder.

"And look at you. You can't even sit properly. You're covered in mud and you've got leaves in your hair like you sleep in the woods. Damn it, I told you to stay home today, Cat! No wonder everybody's tongues are wagging about you, too."

"What do I have to do with it?"

Henry throws his hat into a chair and glares at me. "Bill's sister says you wooed the Devil and that's why he blazed a sign in our field—to show that you're his."

Lord, I can't help but laugh at that. "Dora Hoss is just a mush-minded girl." I get up from the window, pick up Henry's crushed hat, and press it back into shape. "She's got nothing in her head but nits." I put Henry's hat on my head, down low, over one eye. "What does it matter, anyway?"

His hands ball into fists. "Blazes, Catrina! You think Father and I can bring in the sorghum, the corn, and the barley all by

ourselves? You know his heart's weak. If people say our farm's cursed, they won't want our help at harvest and they sure won't help us with our crops. It could ruin us." His face turns the color of a ripe red apple.

"Oh." My voice sounds tiny like the squeak of a mouse. I hadn't had the chance to think it through.

Henry looks like he wants to fling me out the window, or at least send me to my room without supper. But before he can yell anything else, Effie clears her throat and stands up from the rocking chair. That's all she has to do, and I know Henry won't do anything like that now.

When Henry turns toward her, the tension in his shoulders loosens just a whipstitch. He lets out a deep breath. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Effie. I didn't realize."

She gives him a little nod and sets the Bible on the chair. She knows how to calm him down with just a look. It's always been that way. If Henry was a girl, Effie would be his best friend, not mine.

She walks over and takes the hat off my head and hands it back to him. "It wasn't the Devil who made the circles in the field, Henry. It was a young man, delirious from a dangerously high fever. Catrina saved his life—because of her care, his fever just broke. Your father's taken him in like a Good Samaritan. When everyone hears what really happened, they'll stop talking nonsense and forget all about it. Don't worry."

I love Effie for smoothing all the wrinkles from her voice and not telling Henry about me bringing Stonefield in naked. I want to hug her, but I just stand next to her and nod.

Henry stares at the hat in his hands. A line forms across his forehead like somebody plowed a tiny furrow in it. “Father should have spoken to me before taking in a stranger. What sort of man is he—a drifter? The Union army’s conscripting folks in St. Louis—maybe he’s a secessionist, trying to run away to Springfield to join the Confederates. Or he could even be a criminal or a murderer for all we know.”

I snicker.

“You won’t think it’s so funny, Cat, if he creeps to your bed in the middle of the night and slits your throat.”

I imagine Stonefield coming to my bed in the middle of the night. But he doesn’t creep. He walks tall and naked through the moonlit room. And instead of a knife, he’s holding Papa’s Shakespeare. I smile.

Effie narrows her eyes at me before turning to Henry. “We don’t know what kind of man he is, and apparently, he doesn’t either. He says he lost his memory from the fever. But he looks strong and able. When he’s feeling better, he can earn his keep by helping you and your father take care of the farm.”

Henry shakes his head and sighs heavily. “That must be what Father was thinking when he took him in—we could use a hand.” The furrow on his forehead is still there, but it isn’t quite so deep. He puts his hat back on. “I’ll go over to the Hoss place and set them straight. Allow me to give you a ride home on my way, Miss Effie.” He smiles at her, and when she smiles back and says, “Yes, thank you very much, Henry,” he starts whistling a tune as he heads toward the front door.

Effie snaps her bag of medicines shut and turns to me before leaving. “I’ll come by tomorrow to check on your guest.”

I almost say that he just needs my care and a little sleep, and I want him all to myself, but I swallow those words. I just nod my head and make myself say what Mother would have said. “Thank you, Effie. That’s mighty kind of you.”

5



STONEFIELD SLEEPS THE REST OF THE EVENING AND into the night. I get up with a grease lamp every so often and poke my head into the study, quiet, just to look at him. I like to watch when his eyes move back and forth under their lids. I wonder what he dreams about if his memory's still gone. I wonder if he's dreaming about me.

Even though Stonefield's still sleeping in the morning, Henry makes Papa wait until Effie arrives late in the day before they go mend the sorghum field. He says it's not proper for me to be home when there's a strange man in the house unless we have a chaperone. After they greet Effie and she checks on Stonefield, Henry invites her to stay for supper later. Of course she accepts, and when Papa and Henry head to the field, I'm stuck with her. I love Effie, but Lord, I just want her to go.

I can't stop fidgeting. I glance toward the study. I feel him tugging me back to him like there's a rope between us with him tied on one end and me on the other. I move toward the study door.

Effie sighs. “Catrina.” She shakes her head. “Stonefield isn’t going anywhere. Let him rest. Sleeping is what his body needs to get his strength back. I’m sure he’ll surprise us all with his improvement when he wakes up. I can tell that you want to make a friend of him, but he’s a complete stranger. It’s important that he finds his family and friends as soon as possible. The newspapers are full of talk about Indians lately and it causes irrational fears. There are people in Roubidoux who might treat someone like him, someone different, as a novelty, but most people will just want him gone.”

“Oh, Effie, how do you know? You always think bad things will happen. What does it matter to those people who Stonefield is? He can stay here with us and do whatever he wants—they can’t stop him.”

Effie just shakes her head like she’s continuing her argument in her mind but won’t say it out loud because she thinks I’m too dense to understand it.

It burns me up.

She clears her throat. “If we’re going to have supper ready by the time your father and brother get back, we should get started. What are we having?” Effie’s always suspicious of my cooking, for no good reason.

“It’s a surprise.” I head toward the back door, anxious to find a way to see Stonefield without her knowing.

“Well, where are you running off to?”

“I have to go hunt down some ingredients.” I turn the door-knob. “How about you make the cornbread and potatoes while I’m gone.”

“How about you hurry back and help. And you still haven’t taken a bath! You should wash the mud off yourself—you look like a pig.”

Before she can say anything else, I slip outside and shut the door behind me. I watch Effie through the window as she walks to the kitchen, shaking her head at the mess she sees. As soon as she gets there, I run around the house to the study window and peer through the pane. Stonefield lies on the cot with his back toward me.

I drum my fingertips against the glass and Stonefield turns right around like he knew I was coming. His hair’s ruffled and his eyes are bright as he sits up. He grins at me and starts to get out of bed. I point to the set of Henry’s old clothes that I laid next to the pillow and I watch as he puts them on. Every muscle and tendon in his body’s strung tight as a fiddle string, yet he moves so slow and easy. Lord, how can the same pants and shirt that hung on Henry’s body look so different on Stonefield? It’s like the clothes were sleeping and now they’re awake. Watching the way he moves makes something inside me tremble like a blade of grass in the breeze.

He comes to the window and presses his nose flat against the glass. I clamp my lips shut so Effie can’t hear me laughing at the face he’s making. He lifts the window and leans out.

“Catrina.”

I hear my name every day, but not the way he says it. He makes it sound like a precious jewel cradled in the palm of his hand.

“Stonefield. How do you feel?”

“New. Like I was just born.”

“Then come with me.”

Before I finish the words, he’s climbing out the window. He doesn’t even ask me where I’m going, but that rumbly voice of his that I hear in my head says he doesn’t care as long as we’re together.

I grab a gunnysack from the shed and take off through the backyard toward the woods. He’s right behind me. Dry leaves crunch under our feet until we reach the quiet of soft moss. We’re almost to the creek. I feel him reach out and touch the ends of my hair, whipping in the wind, and he catches hold like it’s a horse’s mane and pulls me back against him. I laugh at the sharp-alive feel of it. We’ve stopped running, but still, we can barely catch our breath. His fingers get tangled in my hair, but he doesn’t try to get loose. He holds on tighter. The stern lines of his face make him look wild as a wolf. He could break my neck with a jerk of his hand, but his eyes and his touch tell me he’d never hurt me in a thousand years.

“Stonefield.” I like to say it. The name sounds hard and gentle at the same time. Dark cold rock and soft warm earth like our sorghum field.

He smiles. I want to run my fingers over his lips to memorize it. I want to keep him smiling like that forever.

“Effie says I’m dirty as a pig.”

He laughs. “Effie sounds very observant.”

“There’s a swimming hole under that weeping willow.”

Stonefield glances at the creek and laughs again. “Looks like a good place to wash a pig.”

I laugh, too, as I work at pulling his fingers from my hair. He tightens his grip. “But what if you’re a water nymph, trying to escape me?”

*“You nymphs, call’d Naiads, of the winding brooks,
With your sedged crowns and ever-harmless looks,
Leave your crisp channels and on this green land
Answer your summons; Juno does command:
Come, temperate nymphs, and help to celebrate
A contract of true love; be not too late.”*

“If you don’t let me go, I’ll be too late to help Effie and she’ll want to skin me.”

“Well, I don’t want to be the cause of a water nymph’s gruesome death.” He loosens his fingers on my hair, and I pull away, still laughing.

I bolt to the willow, part its branches like a curtain, and duck inside. When the curtain falls back into place, light seeps through the little gaps and I see Stonefield staring back at me. I want him to see all of me, the way I saw him naked in the field. I take off my shirt and pants as we watch each other. I like the way he looks at me, like his eyes are touching me. I can almost feel his gaze on my skin. But when he moves toward the willow branches, my heart starts thumping hard and sudden like it wants free from my ribs. It startles me and I step quick into the cool shady water of the creek under the willow’s canopy.

It’s like stepping into another world. The water laps at my thighs, beckoning me in. It drinks me up like cold ale and

swallows me as I sink to the pebbly bottom. I push off and swim underwater until I think I've cleared the willow's sweeping branches. When I come up and feel the air kiss my skin, the world seems more alive than I remember.

Stonefield's unspoken words float over the water into my head. *What are you doing, water nymph?*

He watches as I swim to a log jutting across the middle of the creek. A giant bullfrog sits there with its back to me. I'm a cottonmouth snake, gliding up behind it slow and quiet. I strike, sweeping the stunned frog off its perch, and hold it up for Stonefield to see.

"Catching some supper. Throw me the gunnysack."

He grins and throws it to me. "I should've known naiads would serve something like frog legs for supper."

I hunt down more bullfrogs while Stonefield watches from the bank. He hums the tune he sang in the cane field, the one asking the girl to come live in the wild with him and be his love. They'll make their clothes out of leaves and feathers and sleep in beds of flowers.

I smile to myself. The song reminds me of my wild work. I've never shown it to anyone before, but maybe I will show it to Stonefield. Maybe tomorrow. My heart beats faster at the idea of sharing my secret with him.

It takes me a while, but I catch four more fat frogs to put in my sack and swim back to the willow tree. As the cool air hits me, my whole body tingles, but it's not just the breeze over my skin, it's Stonefield's gaze that makes my breath come faster. Under the canopy, I hum Stonefield's song and smile at him as

he watches me wring out my hair and tug my clothes on over my wet skin. Before I can do up all my buttons, his strong arm shoots through the branches and hooks my waist. Stonefield yanks me through the curtain into the sunlight, just as easy as I snatched the bullfrogs out of the water.

“I caught the biggest one.” He loses his balance from pulling me toward him and we both fall down on the mossy creek bank, laughing. I like the firmness of his arm around me and the rise and fall of his chest on my back, and the moss under my side. I lie against him, feeling his heart beat under his bones and skin. It’s the same rhythm as mine.

“Stonefield.” I turn to face him. “When you walked toward my gun in Papa’s field, were you wanting a bullet to stop your heart from beating?”

Stonefield stays quiet for several moments, thinking. Waiting to hear what he says is torture. I’ve never wanted to know someone’s thoughts as much as I want to know his.

He props himself up on one elbow. “I didn’t care about the bullet,” he says. “There was something I wanted more.”

“What was it?”

“The same thing you wanted when you pointed the gun at me.”

“I wanted you not to go,” I say.

“It was the same for me. I would rather you had shot me dead than have to leave you behind.”

“Stonefield, I feel as if I know you.”

He nods. *From ages ago*, he says to me without his voice. He

moves a strand of wet hair away from my eyes. “I think I must have been looking for you.”

I smile. The things he’s telling me are so similar to what I feel, it seems as if he’s speaking my own thoughts for me.

He plucks a little pebble from the bank and turns it over in his fingers.

“What do you have?” I uncurl his fingers. The creek stone has a tiny hole through its center.

“I think it’s a magic seeing stone. It finds the beauty in the world, no matter where you are.” He lifts it to his eye and smiles as he looks at me through the opening. “Yes, this is definitely a magic seeing stone.” He hands it to me.

I lift it to my eye and squint through the opening. Everything else in the world disappears at once except for Stonefield’s earnest face framed in the circle. His tangled hair hangs in his eyes, and his grin is the happiest, most peaceful thing I ever saw. I place the image, the moment, into the treasure box of my memory. In the future, whenever I raise it to my mind’s eye, I’m certain everything else will vanish just as it does now.

I rummage in my deep pockets to find a piece of yarn and thread it through the pebble’s hole. When I lift it to my neck, Stonefield takes the ends from me, and I hold up my hair so he can tie the necklace for me in the back. As I let go of my hair, it falls over his arms like water. He gathers it gentle and lets it run through his fingers, his hands trailing slow down my shoulders as if he doesn’t want to be done with his task.

I close my eyes, wishing I could feel it all over again. When

I turn back to him, the world seems to have shifted just a speck, like I can see things I've never noticed before. Everything seems different, clearer, now that his seeing stone rests over my heart.

"Listen," I whisper.

For a moment, all we hear is the rush of the water and our own breathing, coming fast and heavy. But then I hear it again—a voice in the distance calling my name.

"It's Effie." I get to my feet. "She'd skin you if she saw you running around so soon after having a fever. She thinks you should sleep for days."

Stonefield waves the idea away like he's shooing off a fly. "I can sleep when I'm dead." He smiles, and the corners of his eyes crinkle up. I want to touch his face.

Effie calls my name again, closer this time, and Stonefield gets to his feet.

I pick up the gunnysack. "I'll go first, and you wait here a few minutes. I'll get her to the kitchen so you can get back into bed." Water from my hair drips down my forehead to my lips. I lick the bead and taste the wet earthy tang of river and grass on my tongue. *I don't want to go.* I say the words to him without speaking.

Neither do I.

Feeling him say it sends a thrill up my spine. He takes my hand. "But adieu, sweet water nymph. Until we meet again."

When he kisses my fingertips, the whole world trembles. No, it's just my knees shaking. Lord. I turn and run back through

the woods, my wet hair slapping my back and my heart pounding my ribs like a fist against a door.

Effie's hands are on her hips when I get to the yard and she frowns at the undone buttons on the old shirt of Henry's that I always wear and how I never bother wearing any underclothes beneath it. "Catrina, Henry's home. He's putting away the wagon."

"Already? Seems like I just left."

"Where have you been? I could have finished having dessert and tea with my father and sister by now if I'd gone home for supper."

"You can have dessert here—I made shoofly pie the other day." I try to catch my breath. "I bet your sister doesn't even know how to make shoofly pie."

Effie doesn't seem impressed. "I could be playing 'Heavenly Bliss' for them on my father's pianoforte this very minute."

Lord, she's crabby today. I wish I could make her happy as I am, make her feel what I feel—like I'm flying in a sky of sunshine. "You can still have some music after supper, Effie—I'll play the fiddle for you." I laugh as I imagine Effie and Stonefield dancing a jig.

She sighs. "Catrina, there's no butter churned or linens washed for the table. Sometimes I wonder if you ever think of anybody but yourself."

The heaviness of her words hits me like a blow to the heart. I want to tell her I've been thinking of Stonefield ever since I first saw him and there's been no room in my head for anything

else. But I swallow up my excuse and say, “I’m sorry, Effie,” and give her a peck on the cheek as I hurry past her into the house to make it up to her. I start whistling “Oh! Susanna” and grab the slop bucket and a knife.

Effie follows me in and crosses her arms over her chest. She raises an eyebrow when the sack moves. “Catrina Dickinson, what in Heaven’s name are you making for supper?”