

STONE WOMAN

CHAPTER ONE: THE STRANGE CHILD

The stubby-horned buck deer stood in a patch of lupine on the side of a knoll. It suddenly lifted its head. Its sensitive ears twitched for a moment then froze on a sound that came from close by...too close. Preoccupied with the tasty seeds of the blue-flowered plant, its keen senses were dulled. In the past, similar lapses on the part of the animal's kin had often been fatal.

Despite its terror the deer did not flee, lest it bolt into the path of the unknown stalker. Its brown eyes darted back and forth to seek out the danger. No, not the gold-mantled ground squirrel fifteen yards away, but... There! Along the base of the knoll, visible between the lichen-covered trunks of hemlocks, stood one of the creatures from the strange reed hives by the river. Creatures more feared than the black bear, even the cougar, for they killed from far away with sharp sticks, and—more recently—with a different kind of stick, terrible, smoke-belching ones of thunder.

But this intruder—much smaller than the ones who came to kill—carried none of these things, only a tule basket half-filled with *apams*, the wild potatoes she had uprooted. Nor did the girl's closeness to the deer heighten her interest in it. She followed a purposeful path, and quickly her long strides carried her well past the deer. Its head cocked, the animal watched her retreat, until loud calls broke the stillness of the surrounding meadow. The deer bolted up the slope and fell quickly from sight.

"Nanooktowa!"

"Please, wait for us!"

The girl heard the voices and strode faster. She was, after all, Nanooktowa, "the strange child," and seldom did as others expected her to do. As an infant she had hardly cried, even when the death of her mother had forced her to suckle at another's breast. In her childhood she had stayed apart from most children, her time spent around Secot, her father, and other adults, learning what they knew. By her fifth summer the girl's knowledge and quick-wittedness made her seem older than those of eight, even ten summers.

And more important, it was during her fifth summer that she had made her first visit to the Sacred Place.

Nanooktowa was one of the Moadokni, the People of the Southern Lakes. She had reached her eleventh summer in 1849—as it was called by the *basdin*, the white man, the strangers who called them *Modocs*. Although the Moon of the Wocus Harvest—June—had already come, it had not even been a whole moon since the People returned to build their temporary wickiups along the southern Oregon territory's Link River, below the upper Klamath Lake. The winter had been hard; the People had remained longer inside their warm, permanent winter lodges in the twin villages on the Lost River, farther south. Their spring fishing, though done in haste, had been good. Now they had come here, to be touched by the warm breath of summer, to dig *apams* from the moist meadows. They had come back to the Link River—the place where Nanooktowa had been born—to be near the center of all things, the Sacred Place...the place of the magic.

"Nanooktowa, stop running. I must speak with you."

Uleta, a boy of thirteen summers, had once been among those who'd taunted the strange child. But in the past year, while experiencing the joy and confusion of the time when a boy becomes a man, his feelings

toward her had changed. From sullen silence came an attentive sort of brotherly protectiveness, though only as much as she would allow. Now, since the end of winter, it had become something else. Nanooktowa understood, more so than the immature Uleta.

“Nanooktowa!”

Frowning, the girl spun to face Uleta, and also her cousin, Koalaka. But it was not their pursuit that made angry lines in her face, an expression that quickly turned into sadness as she realized that what she feared had become true. The strong gusts of the south wind—the prelude to the magic that had started her off on her quest—suddenly lessened, then died completely. There would be no magic at the Sacred Place...

No, not true, they blow strongly again!

So much so that Nanooktowa’s cousin, two years younger and slight of build, nearly fell, but Uleta grabbed her arm. Thus occupied, they did not see the smile that appeared on Nanooktowa’s face for only a moment. She wanted to hurry away, but they were close, so with arms crossed she waited for them impatiently.

Soon she faced the pair. They had similar features: hair long and black, hanging below their shoulders; dark, deep-set eyes with heavy lids; smooth, dusky skin of a rich copper shade. The boy stood of average height for his age, and stocky, unlike Koalaka, who only now had begun to fill out.

But Nanooktowa’s eyes, though dark, were alert, inquisitive, mirroring the wisdom of one much older. Her lengthy hair, a deep brown, showed streaks of red, and her skin was of a cinnamon hue. She stood half a head shorter than the boy and had filled out amply in the manner of her people. Her round face was unblemished, and comely, more so when she smiled.

“What do you want, Uleta?” she asked.

His eyes tried to meet hers, but failed. Panting, he said, “You run so fast. We...could not catch up.”

Nanooktowa shrugged. “I was not running, but walking quickly. And you know why.”

“You are not going *there* again!” her cousin exclaimed. “Come back to the village with us.”

“*You* may return to the village. I am going to the place of Our Father. This wind is the first of the season.” Her face grew pensive. “During the winter I often dreamed of this day.”

“But the Sacred Place is not for us,” Uleta insisted.

“It is not for *you*. If you wish to wait until you are a grandfather, that is your concern. But I have spoken before to Kumookumts and it feels right being in his presence. I believe he knows me well.”

Koalaka masked her fear with anger. “My cousin is a fool! How well named she was.”

Uleta glared at the girl. “Do not call her that, or I will forget you are smaller, and...!”

The two bickered; Nanooktowa tired of them, put her basket down and turned to leave. “Take these back to the village. I will see you there later—unless you want to come with me.”

Uleta looked up. “The wind may stop again.”

She tossed back her head, her brown hair fluttering in the stiff breeze. “It will not.”

She strode off and did not look back, certain neither would follow. They soon resumed their quarreling.

“I still think she is a fool,” Koalaka said.

“I warned you what I would do if you said that again, *wekwek!*” Uleta exclaimed.

The girl shrieked. Nanooktowa glanced over her shoulder to see her cousin scurry up the knoll. Uleta set off after the girl. He could easily have overtaken her, but came no closer than five yards. Nanooktowa knew that he would make her run the whole way back to the village.

Now she turned away and ran too, for the minute wasted had seemed longer. Her soft moccasins glided through the dew-soaked meadow grass. For a time she continued to parallel the base of the hillock, for earlier it had veered in the right direction. But soon this was not good enough. Anxious to be near the river, she started up the slope.

The People—until now she had ignored the reality that they, too, had felt the south wind, that many were on the way to the Sacred Place—or already there. She understood this, for the place meant much to the Modocs. Still, she bore happy memories of the times when she had been the only one, of the few occasions when, sitting by the Sacred Place, she had felt the south wind cast its breath on her, had actually *seen* the start of the magic. Not today...no, not today.

The Link River, visible from atop the knoll, was a rock-walled channel that carried the waters of the upper Klamath Lake to its level in the lower Klamath Lake, part of which dipped into the California territory.

But no frothing torrent ran now, only a trickle through the middle of the deep bed, and thinner rivulets in crevices that played out from their core like the strands of a spider's web. Nanooktowa saw none of her people along either bank, but this did not mean anything, for her view was only of a small portion of the river.

Though not far to the edge of the tributary, it took time for the girl to negotiate the bank. Rocks and boulders lay strewn everywhere, and fissures rent the hard ground. One could injure a leg. Eventually she sidled around a tall, jagged outcropping, one similar to another on the opposite side. Had giant hands pushed the hills together they would have joined perfectly, for a long time ago—five, ten centuries, maybe more—the stone mountain had been torn apart by a monstrous flood that occurred after a volcanic upheaval, leaving the channel that now existed. By itself it was a place of awe; but it was not *the* place.

Bracing against the wind that whistled through the gorge, Nanooktowa lowered herself to the bed and crossed to the east bank, continuing upriver. The footing remained just as hazardous but she walked quickly, being on familiar ground.

Then, she heard the sounds and knew she had arrived.

The hissing: jets of hot water exploding from the bowels of the earth a few yards back from the bank. The bubbling: the waters of the upper Klamath Lake, deterred at their outlet by the force of the south wind, rising in an angry tide. Lesser tributaries carried off some, but the greater wall strained to resume its interrupted journey down the Link River.

In the middle of the now nearly dry channel, cut deeply into the stone, she saw footprints. Large ones, resembling those of a man. Footprints encircling—something else. A towering stone whose uppermost part, when seen amid the water rushing past it, would mean nothing; but with the flow receded this giant could only be recognized for what it was: the image of a person.

The Sacred Place, the soul of the domain that the People called the Smiles of God. The place of the Creator, Kumookumts, Our Father, who had left *his* image, *his* footprints. The birthplace of the Lalacas, the children of God, ancestors of the Modocs, whose tradition stretched back to the dawn of time.

The place of the magic.

Nanooktowa, trembling softly, sat on the bank, beyond the range of the arcing streams of hot water, her legs dangling in the channel. Looking around, she became aware of something: the People; none on her side, none across. The strange child sat alone.

She smiled and turned her attention back to the river. “Our Father, it is I, Nanooktowa,” she whispered, knowing that, despite the wind, he would hear. She gestured around her. “The People are busy, for we have not been back long, and I suppose that is why they have not yet come. But...perhaps you meant it this way. Perhaps this first wind was for me, and if so, I thank you. Now, Kumookumts, let me tell you all that has happened since we last spoke.

“The winter was long, but you helped us through it. I like the winter sometimes, but I am glad it is over...everywhere except there, of course.” She pointed north, toward the high peaks of the distant Cascade Mountains, which still wore their crowns of white. Her keen eyes outlined the nearly invisible lines on its southern slopes, the streams that fed the upper Klamath Lake.

“You remember I talked to you about Uleta? He does not tease me anymore, for he is in love with me...he thinks.” She laughed. “I understand this—a little—but I do not love him, at least not yet. Uleta is so much like all the rest. But there is little choice. I imagine I could learn to...

“Our Father, I am sorry, you do not want to be troubled with such foolishness! Let us speak of the *basdin*. I suppose you are keeping an eye on them. More and more they were the subjects of conversations in the winter *temescals*. I have not yet seen one; I do not think I ever want to. Some of our men wear their clothes and carry their awful guns. But they have gotten these from the trading councils in the far-off northern place called The Dalles, not from the ones who have come to our land. They have killed some of the People and we some of them, although the *Lagi* has said we should avoid them. My father agrees with our chief.

“But now there is something else. The shiny metal, the *gold*, has brought more of them here, and they stay. There is even word of a white man's village to the southwest, toward the Ieka mountain. Please, Kumookumts, let them find what they want, so they may leave the Smiles of God and go back where they came from. As my cousin Kientpoos has said, “The People do not need this distraction in their lives.””

The girl continued her talk with the Creator, pausing once to extract a gourd from a hiding place in the rocks. She caught some of the steamy, health-giving water from below the earth, downing it after it had cooled. She tried hard not to scowl against its sulfurous taste and smell.

Then, the spell was broken by the approach of people, all stepping gingerly along the bank twenty yards away. Sharing a scowl, the three elders shouted at her; but their words were difficult to hear, for the south wind, now played out, could no longer hold back the tide at the mouth of the lake. Water gushed into the channel and obliterated the footprints, and the top of the stone image became another obscure outcropping in the path of the torrent, which soon thundered through the gorge.

Returning her gourd to its place, Nanooktowa set out in the direction of the elders. They glared at her, but she held their gaze defiantly, until it was they who finally looked away. With a toss of her head the strange child strode nimbly along the edge of the Link River and soon fell beyond the sight of the others as she hurried toward the village.

CHAPTER TWO: THE KENTUCKIAN

The sprawling farms of the Riddles and Bingham had been adjacent to each other for decades. To Frank, the only child of Thomas and Mary Riddle, the Bingham place had always been “just the other side of Dutch Creek.” But not until he was fourteen did he pretend to notice Ellen Bingham, two years younger.

Now, nearly seventeen, he was in love with her.

On a Sunday summer afternoon, Ellen and Frank picnicked atop a bluff overlooking a fork of Dutch Creek, on the Bingham side of the long white fence. Ellen had spread her quilt under some cottonwood trees. The day was sultry, the sun beating on the bluegrass.

In looks, the pair who devoured Lizy’s fried chicken appeared as different as any two people possibly could. Frank was swarthy, hair ink black, eyes a deep brown, with thick lashes. His angular face sported a scraggly beard he had begun growing six months earlier. He stood of medium height and, in spite of his ravenous appetite, trim of build.

Ellen, his “fair-haired girl,” had smooth skin. Her twined locks of hair were the color of sunflowers, her eyes like jade. A youthful image of her mother, she would—one day—likely be just as beautiful.

They ate in silence, content to hear the sounds around them: the gentle gurgling of the rivulet at the bottom of the hill, a raucous chorus of katydids, the *tap tap tap* of a woodpecker in an elm. Kentucky summer spoke to them, and they listened.

Lizy’s chicken became a mound of bones. Ellen finally said, “My parents are going to Frankfort today. They’ve probably left already. Another party at the state house.”

“Surprised my folks aren’t going,” Frank said.

Ellen looked puzzled. “Father said they were all riding up together.”

“No, they would’ve told me if they were going to miss supper.”

“By the way, Frank Riddle, I saw *you* in McAfee yesterday. You were talking to Deidre Jamison. Seemed real serious.”

“It was just talk. I stopped in her father’s store for licorice, and she followed me out.”

“She’s been eyeing you for some time, hasn’t she?”

“You stop that now, Ellen. Deidre’s not even fourteen yet!”

“She’s old enough; pretty thing, too. Was that why you were in McAfee?”

“I went to town on an errand for my father. Here, I can prove it.” Frank produced a crumpled piece of paper. “I had to take this to the newspaper and telegraph offices.”

Ellen smoothed it out and read:

#

\$150 REWARD RUNAWAY

From the subscriber, living at Dutch Creek, Mercer County, Ky., a Negro man named Reuben. He is about 5 feet nine inches high, about 25 years of age, of black complexion, weighs about 160 pounds, and has a deep scar on his chin. He is a very likely man. He had on a white cotton shirt and brown pants.

I will give a reward of \$100 if taken anywhere in this State, or \$150 if taken out of the State and delivered to the jail at McAfee, Ky. All reasonable expenses will be paid.

THOMAS A. RIDDLE

#

Ellen handed back the paper. "So Reuben's run off again. If your father gets him back, maybe he ought to have Loomis chop off some toes. That'll keep him around. We did it to a couple of our Negroes."

Frank glared at her. "Did you ever watch your father's overseers do it, Ellen?"

"Mercy no! I would never... I mean, it's a terrible thing—"

"Yes it is. You remember that."

"I'm sorry. I know you take kindly to your Negroes. Let's talk about something else. Frank, I was only teasing about Deidre Jamison. You want to lay your head down?"

"Sure!"

The girl put her back against a cottonwood and stretched out her legs. Frank lowered his head to the softness of her summer dress. She stroked his temples as his senses swirled.

Ellen also loved Frank. How perfect—this match even *her* parents approved of: the son of their neighbors. "Biggest place in three counties for you and your young'ns," Mr. Bingham had said.

After a while Frank said, "I like when you do that."

"I know; but it's my turn." They traded positions; Ellen smiled as he massaged her neck. "Did anything else happen in McAfee yesterday?"

"You know Wally Harmon, the farmer with that small place about a mile west of town?"

"The family with the two dirty-looking boys and the girl who got forced to go to school?"

"Yes; but we won't be seeing them again. The Harmon's left for California. Got enough for his land to—
"

Ellen sat up and eyed him sternly. "I declare, Frank Riddle, you can't let a day go by without bringing it up. I hate when you talk about...that place!"

"All I said was they left. Why not? Lord knows they're poor enough; they couldn't do any worse."

"That's fine for them. But when you tell me about what you heard or read all I think about is you going there, and I don't like it. That's crazy talk."

"Why? Thousands of folks are headed west. There's gold, Ellen; a man could get rich."

"Why would you be worrying about *that*?"

"My *folks* have money, not me. A man should have a chance to make something of himself." He saw she was upset. "Don't worry, I'm not going to California. And if it'll make you feel better, I won't talk about it anymore."

They heard a distant rumbling. To the east ominous clouds sat on the horizon. They gathered their things, ran down the slope and crossed the fork to the white fence, laughing as they paralleled it. A hundred yards along they neared the Bingham house. It stood past the far end of a patch of tobacco. Three Negro women toiled under the eye of Bunch, the overseer, a brutal man who made the Riddles' own Loomis seem kindly.

They stopped, and Ellen indicated the approaching clouds. "If you walk me home, then for sure you'll get soaked. You go. I'll be fine."

She ran toward the field. Climbing the fence Frank called, "See you tomorrow?"

"In the afternoon. Mother has plans for the morning."

He dashed across a grazing pasture then cut through a cornfield, emerging near the slaves' quarters, small wood cabins with mud-chinked walls and hand-split shingle roofs. Earlier, Lucretia and old Abraham had been sitting out front, preparing johnnycakes on an ash board to the delight of many children. Now, with the first drops falling, they had gone inside.

Rain fell hard as the boy neared Ridland, a brick structure with ten steps leading up to an imposing Ionic portico. Below the overhang Frank shook himself off, then pushed open the heavy wooden door.

"Lawd, but was ah worried 'bout you, Maz Frank!" Lizy exclaimed. "Here, don't you go drippin' on yo' mama's rug now! You stay by that door till ah gets back!"

"Sure, Lizy." Frank chuckled as the ponderous woman waddled off to the kitchen. She was still chattering when she returned with towels.

"Ah hopes you don' catch your death'a cold now," she muttered.

Again he smiled as he looked at her large, worried eyes, which belied the harshness in her voice. Lizy's face; the black jowled face, the first one he remembered seeing over his cradle.

“This storm sho’ nuff worse than t’other day,” she said. “Ah’s prayin’ it won’t be troublin’ yo’ mama and papa none.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t they home?”

“You fo’get, Maz Frank? They’s goin’ on up to the gub’ner’s place.”

Frank glared at her. “They never told me.”

“Sho’ they did; you just be fo’getting’.” Lizy’s eyes rolled as she smiled. “My but yo’ mama looked fine comin’ down those stairs!”

The wet towel slapped against the marble as Frank threw it down. Ellen was right; they *had* gone. Like so many times before, his parents had left him.

He opened the door and stormed out. “Maz Frank, y’all get back in here now!” Lizy cried, but he ignored her as he stumbled down the steps.

The boy ran past the cone-shaped icehouse to the larger smokehouse. He crossed the oppressive room to a rope ladder and scrambled up into the rafters. His “thinking place.” He ignored his wet clothes as he stretched out on a bed of straw.

Why’d they even have me? His earliest memory was of his father being *gone*: on business, to the fields, to a foxhunt near Louisville. Or his mother, away on a matter of social significance, or home, entertaining. Or both, off to Lexington or Frankfort. *Too busy for me.* It still hurt; even though he would be seventeen soon, it hurt him no less than when he was seven.

California. If not for Ellen, he would have gone there already. He’d heard folks read letters from friends and kin who had been there a while, or from those who had recently left, victims of the gold fever. He had read every word on California in newspapers.

The storm passed an hour later. He climbed down and walked to the back porch. Lizy waited for him in her rocking chair.

“Weren’t hard guessin’ where you’d be, Maz Frank. Y’all get on up to yo’ room and get outta them clothes now. And don’ go tellin’ me they’s awready dried out. I knows difrent.”

He climbed the back steps to his room and did as she told him. Before going down he reached for a treasure on a shelf by his bed—a leather-bound book, purchased in Louisville: *The Oregon Trail*, an account of a westward trek made a few years ago by a young man from Massachusetts named Francis Parkman. Frank had already journeyed from cover to cover three times. He tucked it under his arm and descended to the kitchen, where Lizy worked.

“Will my parents be back in time?” he asked.

“Fo’ suppa? Uh-uh. The gub’ner’ll feed ’em proper. Dey be back befo’ yo’ bedtime.”

“You call me when supper’s ready.”

The sun had emerged after the clouds, leaving the warm air heavy with moisture. Frank crossed the courtyard to an old buckeye tree where he read chapter nine, *Scenes at Fort Laramie*. He had just begun *The War Parties* when Lizy called him. He ate with her in the kitchen, like many times before: just the two of them. Her husband, David, had driven the Riddles to Frankfort, while their son and daughter had been sold for a handsome profit.

Afterward, Frank went outside to wait for the coach. The night was cooler but the air remained heavy. Old Abraham had already lit the lanterns. Frank settled under one and resumed his reading. Then, he heard the coach. The skittish two-horse team neared. David, dressed in a top hat and flowing tails, waved to them from the board.

“Massa Frank, lissen—” the snowy-haired black began.

“Where are my parents?” He stared into the empty cab.

“Dey stays in Frankft, says to me come and get ’em in de afnoon t’morra. Business of some kind, ah ’spects—Massa Frank?”

Frank Riddle ran to the thinking place, where he spent the night.

###

Monday’s dawn sent sunlight through a small window near the smokehouse roof. Frank awakened with its warmth on his face. The night had done nothing for the stifling air inside.

He tried to shrug off the reality that, again, his parents had ignored him. The pages of the book began to turn. He read for over an hour, until the door opened. Dishes rattled on the tray Lizzy carried. She did not call to him; they had a rule about that. But he heard her mumbling as she set the tray down.

Lizzy made certain to slam the door when she left. Frank scrambled down and attacked the eggs and sausage, cold milk, warm muffins with honey. He devoured it all and felt better. Climbing back up, he reread *Scenes at the Camp*, then followed the journey to *The Pueblo* and *Bent's Fort* past mid-morning.

The day turned hot; soon he found the smokehouse unbearable and left. In the yard David, traveling pass in hand, led two horses to the coach for his ride to Frankfort. Lizzy stood outside when he carried the tray into the kitchen. He hurried upstairs, returned the book to his room then slipped out back and walked to Dutch Creek.

One particular spot drew Frank: a portion of the creek, wide and deep, its banks choked with berry bushes, Kentucky coffeetrees, and a splendid white elm. Embedded in the loam was a lichen-covered trunk, where he hung his clothes before dipping into the clear water. He glided up and down the creek for a while then floated in its shady coolness. Finally, near noon, he hauled himself out and got dressed.

Still, Ellen did not appear. Two hours passed. He absently skipped stones. Then he heard a rustling sound. Ellen emerged from the shrubs. She moved gracefully on bare feet to where he waited and sat down.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"Mother and I went to Frankfort. She took me shopping for clothes and such, what with school starting again..." Her voice trailed off. A pained look marred her face. "Frank, I...have to tell you something. I-I won't be going to school with you. Mother's enrolled me at the Boudinet School for Girls, where she went."

His heart fell. "But that's in Louisville!"

"I'll live there most of the year; but I'll be home some Sundays, and Christmas, and—"

He looked at her coolly. "Was it what *you* wanted?"

"Yes; I mean—I don't know. Mother's always talked about it. I suppose I'm glad."

"I guess I'm happy for you. It's just that...the thought of not seeing you and all!"

"Nothing will change." She kissed his cheek. "It's just four years."

The boy shrugged. "When do you start?"

"I'm leaving on the fourth, a week from tomorrow. Sorry I'll miss your birthday."

"Let's not talk about it anymore. You want to walk over to Timms Bluff?"

"I can't. Mother and Amanda are waiting to fit my new clothes. We can meet in the morning; but only for a little while. There's so much to do."

Frank watched her go. Heedless of the searing sun, he ran back to Ridland.

##

Thomas Riddle was an imposing figure, strong of character. He had inherited nothing and had worked hard to achieve what he owned. He was fifty-three, five years older than his wife, both far removed in time from the son who had come to them late in life.

Approaching the house, Frank saw his father walking toward the stable. Old David brought out one of the horses and began saddling it.

"Pa!" Frank called.

"Boy, how you doing," he said. "Where you been?"

"Over to Dutch Creek. Pa, were you going somewhere?"

"To town. They caught Reuben. I want to be there when they bring him in. Found him ten miles from Cincinnati. Hope they didn't rough that crazy nigger up too bad. Don't want to pay for useless property." He took the reins from David. "I don't know when they'll be down; may be late. I have to go, Loomis is waiting."

He mounted and rode off. Frank asked David, "My mother in the house?"

The black man nodded. "She wuz talkin' wid Lizzy in de kitchen, Massa Frank."

They went back to the house together. Voices reached them through the screen door.

"...and the coffee cannot be as bitter as last time," Mary Riddle said. "One of the ladies complained that—oh, Frank."

"Hello, Mother."

Mary offered her cheek. "Your father rode into McAfee. Just as well. Some ladies from the auxiliary were coming over, and he hates listening to our gossip."

"Were they coming after dinner?" Frank asked.

"Originally it was to be for coffee. But when your father said he was going to town I sent William to invite them for dinner. You'll take care of yourself, Frank dear, won't you? Oh, look at the time; so much to do! Lizy will see you eat well."

"Yes ma'am."

##

Frank saw Ellen briefly during the next week as she prepared for school. They made plans for the summer's last picnic on Sunday.

Reuben, the runaway, was brought back. Frank had always liked the intense young man. He figured Reuben's defiant ways would get him in trouble. He'd been whipped the first time; now the punishment was doubled: forty lashes. Loomis meted it out in front of all the slaves. Frank also watched, his teeth grinding as flesh was torn from the proud man. By the fortieth count Reuben's back had become bloodied pulp. But he made no sound.

"Damn nigger," Loomis said. "He'll cry for his mammy yet!"

Before he could raise the bullwhip again Frank stepped in front of Loomis and glared at him. A standoff ensued. The overseer then stormed away. The blacks hurried to assist Reuben into the hands of Lucretia, their healer.

Early Friday morning, Frank heard a stone against his window. Looking down he saw William, Reuben's younger brother, waving frantically. He climbed down the vine-covered trellis. "What is it, William?"

"Reuben, Massa Frank!" the boy cried. "Dey come fo' him! Loomis, an' Massa Bunch."

"Bunch? What the devil...!"

"Dey took him to the woods. Lawd, he was hurtin', Massa Frank!"

"You go back to your cabin and stay there."

Frank ran to the woods. Through the trees, a hellish cry shattered the morning silence. It sounded twice in brief bursts, then went on without pause, rising. He followed it to a clearing.

"Lord no!"

Reuben, face twisted grotesquely, lay in the dirt on his ravaged back, his right leg raised and bent at the knee, fingers wrapped around the bloodied stump of his foot. Loomis and Bunch flanked him, grinning as they watched him writhe. Bunch held a long-handled ax, its razor edge dripping red after severing the foot two inches above the toes.

"Damn, that was clean," Loomis said with admiration.

Bunch shrugged. "Always glad to put a troublemakin' nigger in his place."

"*You bastards!*" Frank cried as he staggered toward the men. "*You craven bastards!*"

He dove at Loomis and leveled him. But the catlike Bunch grabbed Frank by the collar and threw him to the ground.

"You shouldn't interfere, boy," the Bingham's man said. "Ain't none'a yore business."

"Oh no? You wait till my father hears about this. There won't be a plantation in the state that'll hire either of you!"

Loomis rose and grinned. "That ain't so, boy. It was your pappy what told us to do this."

The pair, laughing, left the clearing. Frank carried the unconscious Reuben to Lucretia.

##

On Monday, the day before her departure, Ellen came to Ridland with her mother. The girl had knitted Frank a scarf for his birthday.

"It's real nice," he told her. "Come on, let's take a walk by the creek."

"No, we can't stay long. I still have more packing."

"When will I see you again?"

"October. I'll be home on the last Saturday and Sunday."

"Can I come see you in Louisville?"

"Mercy no! They're strict about that. October's not so far off."

Ellen left for school the next morning. Frank spent the day sulking in the smokehouse rafters.

##

Frank found escape in hunting, favoring an area of wilderness a few miles east. Squirrels and rabbits abounded there, an occasional deer or wild turkey. He enjoyed the solitude of the pre-dawn woods, and the appreciation of the Negroes for giving them most of what he shot.

On September 6, his seventeenth birthday, his parents gave him a new percussion rifle to replace his flintlock. It was a fine weapon, nearly identical to the muzzle-loading gun used by the U.S. Army.

Thomas Riddle declared his eagerness to join Frank and try the rifle out. Frank had not asked him, especially after what had happened with Reuben. But the bonds of flesh and blood won out. For the first time in years he looked forward to time with his father.

These were busy weeks, Frank back at school, his father preoccupied with the harvest, auctions. But Riddle was adamant about going with him on the fourth Saturday in September.

On the night before, Frank turned in early. His parents had gone to dinner in McAfee, and he did not hear them return. An hour before dawn he awoke, dressed and hurried to their room.

“Pa, wake up,” he whispered.

“Mornin’, boy,” Riddle said. “I’ll be right down.”

Frank loaded his rifle at the foot of the steps. Soon his father appeared above, shrugging into his coat as he descended.

Suddenly Mary Riddle, in a robe, stood over him. “Tom? Where are you going?”

“Huntin’ with Frank. You know—oh Lord, I forgot! Christ, I surely did!”

“I thought you told him last night.”

“What is it, Pa?” Frank asked.

“We saw the Embertons from down Corbin way; they own all that land here in Mercer County? I been tryin’ to get together with him for a long time. The acreage by our south fence that I wanted? Belongs to Emberton.”

“They’re stopping by for breakfast on their way back,” Mary added, walking down. “We’re going to ride with them to look at the land. He may agree to sell.”

“We could have the biggest place in the county!” Riddle exclaimed, pulling off his coat.

“We’re...not going hunting?” Frank glared at them.

Riddle looked at his wife. “I could go for an hour or so.”

She shook her head. “They’ll be here at eight. I don’t want you coming back dirty, or injured. This is too important. Frank understands.”

Riddle smiled at his son. “Your mother’s right. We’ll do it another time, I promise.”

They started up the stairs. Frank stared at their retreating forms. Trembling, he raised the new rifle, the hardwood stock coming to rest against his shoulder, and pointed the long barrel at his father’s back. His thumb fell on the hammer.

A numbing cold spread through his body. He smiled and lowered the gun as he watched Thomas and Mary Riddle reach the second level and turn down the hall. No shaking now, only the serenity of acceptance. It was over. They could no longer hurt him.

Frank walked to the woods. The hunting turned out especially good that morning.

##

School was a necessary tedium. The schoolhouse, though filled with other youths, felt empty without Ellen.

The girl came home for three brief visits before the end of the year. He saw her each time. Her fondness for the Boudinet School was obvious. It dominated their talks.

The new year proved harder. Ellen would not be home again until the spring. The rift between Frank and his parents made sharing even an infrequent dinner table with them awkward. He regressed deeper into his westward dream.

Then, in March, Lizy died. She passed away in her sleep. “Serene-like,” David said. Frank, grieving, could not recall her ever being ill. She would be buried in the slaves’ cemetery.

Later, he told the news to his parents. In their own silent ways they absorbed the death of Lizy, the woman who had once nursed Mary through a fever that nearly killed her. Lizy, who had helped Mary in

childbirth. The woman who, from the day they had bought her at auction three decades ago, had served them faithfully. Frank left them with their thoughts.

From the next room he heard his mother say, “Damn the bother! Who’s supposed to fetch our breakfast?”

A few days later, in early spring, Frank Riddle left Mercer County, Kentucky and began his journey to California.