

Chapter I: The Stone

The Smith brothers were only two of the eight million people who inhabited the twenty-five United States in the fall of 1822. Joseph inhaled deeply in an effort to clear the dust from his lungs. The air was hot and heavy, sweat poured down his face, and his tongue was thick and dry. The seventeen-year-old threw his shovel down and faced his older brother, Alvin. "Whew! It's good to see the light of day. There's no air in that hole."

His body was stained with the same black dirt that had surrounded him only a few moments before. His pants were patched and soiled and his shirt, in places, was threadbare. He used his shirttail to wipe the coal-colored residue from his face and neck. He picked up his old white hat, dusted it, and placed it on his head.

He walked with a slight limp, a carryover from a childhood illness, now so familiar to him that it almost went unnoticed. He reached for the wooden dipper that Alvin had filled from a jug of spring water. He drank slowly and passed the dipper for a refill.

"Air's pretty heavy up here too," Alvin said. He laid the jug down. "Sun goes down pretty soon. It'll cool off."

Joseph breathed deeply to fill his nostrils with crisp, clean air. "Wonder what's taking Willard so long," he mused. Willard acted as foreman of the crew.

"He hasn't surfaced yet. We dug a long way down. I calculate 'bout twenty-four feet and still no sign of water. Old man Chase won't be happy."

The sound of footsteps shuffling through the newly fallen leaves caused Joseph to turn. "Samuel! Norththrop!" he exclaimed at the sight of his friends.

Northrop wore his usual wide grin, his fingers hooked through his suspender straps. "Just stopped by to see how things are going. Not so good, as I hear it."

Joseph was about to answer when Willard's blackened hand surfaced. Slowly he lifted himself out of the hole and stood. Without thinking, he quickly placed his hand over his shirt pocket, brushed against a slight bulge and then smiled.

"What's that in your pocket?" Northrop asked.

"Nothing," Willard protested.

Northrop edged closer. "Lemme see."

Willard withdrew ever so slightly. "It's mine."

"We won't take it from you, Willard. We just want to look."

Alvin passed the dipper and jug to Willard

Willard glanced past the dipper. "Aw right," he said. "Suppose there ain't no harm in just looking." Slowly, he pulled an object out of his breast pocket.

"Why, it's a stone," Samuel said, surprised.

Willard took the hard object and held it in his open palm. Slowly, he turned it. "It's small but sort of curious, ain't it."

Alvin moved closer.

"Look at that!" Northrop said, wide-eyed. "Same color as chocolate."

"Let me see," Joseph inched forward. "I know something 'bout stones."

"You know 'bout everythin'," Samuel said. He tried to nudge Joseph aside.

"Willard knows about stones too, don't you?" Alvin said. "Doesn't your sister use a stone?"

Willard frowned. "Sally has a stone, but I ain't sure I believe in this art of divining."

Joseph shrugged. "What's there to doubt?"

"You would say that," Samuel said. "That ol' guy Walters, he taught you a lot 'bout magic, didn't he."

"He taught me some," Joseph admitted. "So did Pa. And, I had a seer stone before."

"Really?" Northrop asked.

"Sure," Joseph bragged. "Walters taught me a lot. Most everything he knows."

Samuel snickered. "Ha! You're making this up."

"He's not making it up," Alvin said. "I've seen his work with a stone before and the rod-of-nature too."

"The rod-of-nature?" quizzed Northrop.

"Come on!" Joseph said. "Deep down, don't we all believe in spirits?"

"I don't believe in talking with 'em," Willard said, "If they're out there, let 'em be. They ought to be left in peace."

"What if the spirit has a treasure of coins or jewels. We should try to contact the spirit and find the treasure."

"Horse Feathers!" Willard said. "We should leave them alone."

Northrop sighed. "You're always so skeptical. If you can't see nothin', you think it can't be there."

Willard wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "I looked through Sally's stone one day and what I saw was nothin'."

"Just because you don't see it don't mean it's not there," Joseph said. "Not everyone has the power to see with a stone."

"I suppose you do," Willard challenged.

"Joe has the talent, all right," Alvin vouched.

"Take a look, Joe," Northrop said. "We'd all like to know what's below this earth."

Joseph reached down to wipe his sweaty palm on his pant's leg. "If Willard don't mind."

Willard passed the stone. Joseph removed his hat, turned it, and placed the stone in its bowl. He placed his face in the hat and encircled his head with his left arm to block out the light. He took a few steps in each direction. The men stood waiting.

"See anythin'?" Willard asked in a whisper.

Joseph looked up. "Give me a chance." He paced, his face once again buried in his hat.

Moments passed. Willard became impatient. "Well, can you see anything or not?"

Joseph looked up again. "Nope. Can't see a thing." He returned the stone to its owner.

"Well," said Willard, "it'll be dark soon. We don't need a stone to find water. It's got to be here somewhere."

Northrop turned toward his home and called over his shoulder, "Tomorrow, then." Samuel trailed behind.

Joseph and Alvin began their short trek across the flat fields that separated the Chase property from their own one-hundred acre farm. The backdrop of gentle, rolling hills obscured the clear line of the horizon and gave a place for the sun to hide the last rays of light.

Alvin slowed his pace. "Wouldn't it be great if you could see with that stone? Could be all kinds of treasures buried near here."

"Could be!" Joseph gasped at the understatement. He stopped and turned slowly, scanning the distant terrain. The wide-open space was lush and green, dotted with chestnut, hawthorn, cottonwood, and live oak trees. The hills laid consecutively, with a slight overlap. One hill stood out majestically, taller and higher than all the rest.

"Where do you suppose these hills come from? And why do they call them mounds?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Because they're man-made, that's why. They're burial sites."

"Nobody is going to argue with you 'bout that. Everybody knows the tales of the Mound People. Once you get beyond the bones, who knows what a person could find? Surely, there are chests of gold coins."

"No doubt."

"Why, I'd wager those ancient inhabitants had gold and silver. What do you think their money was like?"

"Probably silver. They'd use the gold for bracelets and trinkets and things." Joseph's eyes sparkled with satisfaction. "But you know, that was a seer stone."

"I thought you said you couldn't see nothin'."

"Couldn't. But I recognize the properties and attributes and in the right place, with proper concentration, and in the proper hands, I'm certain that stone has power."

"And you didn't say nothin'."

"If I did, Willard wouldn't let me have it. He'd keep it."

"He kept it anyway."

"Yeah!" Joseph said. "Now I've got to think of a way to get it back."

"Just ask Willard if you can borrow it. It's of no use to him."

"Maybe," Joseph mused. Then he saw their small log cabin in the distance and set aside his thoughts of the stone. "I'll race you," he challenged. They ran toward the cabin and the man standing in front of it.

Father Smith held his hands up with the palms facing outward. "Whoa!" he said. His rough skin revealed decades at the plow. A heavy sprinkling of white hair along the side of his face and through the top of his head gave him an aura of wisdom.

Joseph and Alvin came to a sudden stop. They were breathless.

"I missed you boys in the fields today. How'd things go over at Chase's?"

"No water," Alvin said, gasping for breath. "Joe found a seer stone."

"A seer stone?" Father Smith turned to Joseph. "Where'd you find it?"

Joseph was bent at the waist, his hands resting on his thighs, his labored breathing now becoming shallower. He straightened up. "Willard found it," he said. "He picked it up from the bottom of the well just because he liked the looks of it. He doesn't know it has power."

"Did he let you have it?" Father Smith asked.

"He kept it. But, I'm gonna try to borrow it again."

The three men stooped slightly as they passed through the small cabin doorway. Inside, they faced one large room. At one end stood a rough hewn table and chairs, and a large black pot hung over the hearth. The air was filled with the aroma of boiled rabbit and garden vegetables.

Lucy Smith stood by the hearth, tending the meal. As the men entered, she looked up and by way of greeting she asked, "Anybody hungry?"

"Starved," Father Smith said.

"When do we eat?" Alvin asked.

"As soon as you wash your hands. Hyrum may be late, but there is plenty. He can eat later." Lucy Smith spoke of her second son, aged twenty-two.

The family moved around the small cottage easily. Sophronia, the oldest of the girls, now nineteen, helped her mother set the table, while ten-year-old Catherine watched over year-old baby Lucy. The men seated themselves at the table. Seven-year-old Don Carlos, twelve-year-old William, and fourteen-year-old Samuel entered the room and took their places.

After the evening meal, the girls cleared the table while the men and boys busied themselves with the fire and with rearranging the chairs in a semicircle before the hearth.

"Do we have to read again?" Catherine fussed.

"You learn to read by reading," Lucy said. "And you learn 'bout God through his word."

"I want Joe to tell us a story 'bout the Indians," Catherine insisted, a whine in her voice.

"He told us 'bout the Indians last night," Sophronia said, long-faced.

Don Carlos moved to the front of the hearth and sat on the bare wooden floor. "It was a fun story."

Lucy Smith sat in her favorite rocker, the well-worn family Bible balanced on her lap. "Joe's story was quite entertaining," she said with a smile. "He described the people of long ago so well you'd think he had lived with them all his life.

Don Carlos asked, "Ma, ain't Joe's stories the same as lyin'?"

"I don't lie!" Joseph protested. "I just tell tales."

"Boy has imagination," Father Smith said. He lowered himself into the chair opposite his wife.

"I wanna hear 'bout the Indians again," Catherine persisted.

"I don't," Sophronia said flatly.

Father Smith held up his hand. "Enough!" he said a little too loud.

Lucy was more soft spoken. "Why don't we let Pa tell us 'bout one of his visions."

The young Smiths were as familiar with their father's vision stories as they were with Joseph's tales of the Indians. Father Smith had experienced seven separate moments of meaningful experience that he interpreted as being from God.

The Smith Family sat quietly as Father Smith told a story of a time when an angel appeared to him. The vision included a beautiful stream of water, a low and lush green valley, and a tree of white fruit. Upon tasting the fruit, the father longed for his family. In this vision, he experienced the love of God and saw the city of Babylon.

"What does it mean?" William asked. "Don't the tree and the river mean nothin'?"

"Sure they do," Father Smith answered. "But, sometimes you have to wait to understand the full meaning of a vision."

"Why do people have visions?" Sophronia asked.

"It's God's way of talkin' to us and givin' us spiritual guidance," Lucy said.

Sophronia frowned. "Seems to me, He isn't always clear."

"You could always ask one of the preachers," Don Carlos suggested.

"Preachers?" Father Smith's voice snapped. "Why, they don't know more than anybody else."

Joseph said, "I bet I could take my Bible and go into the woods and learn more in two hours than you can learn at a meeting in two years—even if you go all the time."

"There are so many different churches," Sophronia said, obviously puzzled.

Lucy sighed. "Sometimes the churches seem to testify against each other. Your Pa has no strong feelings 'bout any particular church."

"Not 'bout to either," Father Smith said. "Don't have much faith in preachers." He reached for Lucy's worn text of Scripture and opened the book. After a short reading from the prophecies of Isaiah, he offered a short prayer.

Joseph awoke early the next morning and slipped out unnoticed. The dew was still on the ground when he found Willard preparing for his morning milking chores. It took some convincing but he succeeded in persuading Willard to let him use the stone.

The day's digging brought no water but Joseph was not concerned. He had the stone and had begun to test its power. The more he worked with it the more he became convinced, *"This stone has got fantastic power!"*

Several days later, after continued unsuccessful digging, Joseph met with Martin Harris, a local farmer who occasionally hired the Smith brothers as farm hands. He was taking a shortcut across Smith's field.

"Hey," Joseph called. He was seated on the fence near the barn, his friend Northrop at his side. "Come sit a spell."

"Hi," the round-faced Martin said. He lifted himself to the fence.

"What're you doin' with that pin?" Northrop asked.

"I'm pickin' my teeth with it. What does it look like?"

"It doesn't look too safe to me. What if you swallowed it?"

"If it fell into my mouth, I wouldn't swallow." Then, suddenly struck with an idea, Martin turned to Joseph. "Whatever happened to that stone you told me about?"

"I've got it," Joseph said hesitatingly.

Martin sneezed and then gasped, "I lost my pin!"

"Ha!" Northrop laughed. "I told you."

Martin jumped down from the fence, his arms akimbo. "It fell out of my mouth, not in it."

"It fell."

Martin knelt and searched through the straw, moving the yellow blades ever so lightly. Suddenly, he looked up and said, "Hey, Joe! Why don't you look for it with your stone?"

Joseph lowered himself to the ground and removed his hat. He placed the stone in the upturned bowl and put his face into the hat. He stood very still. Slowly, he lowered himself as he moved his right hand forward. He grabbed onto a stick and began to spread the hay into thin layers.

"There it is," Martin shouted. "Don't move! I see it!" Carefully, Martin scooped the pin into the palm of his hand.

Joseph stood. He displayed the stone between his thumb and index finger. told you I can find things with this stone."

"That's fantastic!" Martin said, full of wonder.

"I've found lots of uses for this stone," Joseph bragged. "I found old man Miller's hatchet after he lost it."

Northrop had his own tale to tell. "Me and Joe went out diggin' the other night, and we came across a chest of some kind. We couldn't dig it up, but Joe saw that it was there through a great mound of earth."

"Really?" Martin stood, wide-eyed.

Soon, stories of chests of gold began to circulate and even though nothing valuable was uncovered, Joseph began to earn a reputation as a necromancer of great skill.