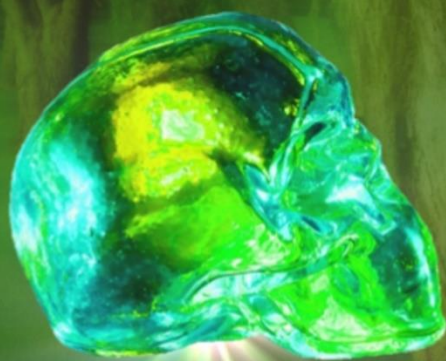


IN STONE SERIES

Secrets
in
Stone

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Secrets in Stone



CECILIA JOHNSON

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in
Stone

~ *Book two* ~

CJ ORIGINALS PUBLISHING



This novel is a work of fiction. Names, descriptions, entities, and incidents included in the story are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, events, and entities is entirely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

My soul's love to Earth's magic, beauty, and endless corridors of mystery.

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The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day ~
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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I MINDSTONE

The daybreak was overcast, not the best picnic weather, but maybe that would change. I tried to brush off my unease as just being caused by the gloomy skies. With a strange foreboding, I dressed and finished my morning ritual.

No one else was up yet, so I quickly downed a bowl of cereal. After I fed the chickens and collected eggs, I quietly put them into the back porch fridge. Detecting no movement from the rest of the household, I sneaked my bike out of the carport, hung a right at the end of the driveway, and sped off toward the cottage on the corner.

Shirkee's Pond was only a quarter mile west of the stone cottage my aunt, Janet owned on Maple Road. I ditched my bike just inside the tree line that obstructed the pond's view from the gravel lane. Silently, I made my way to the water's edge. Peering slowly around, I spotted the pair of male wood ducks I had sensed upon my approach. The clownish-looking fowl swam along the reeds that flanked the still pond. Except for their high-pitched "jeeee, jeeee," the surrounding area was unusually quiet. I had hoped for as much. That meant Murdell was probably close by. Holding on to the supple pouch that lay suspended over my heart, I sent out a silent request for a meeting with the powerful bear.

Even wrapped in leather as it was, I could feel the bear-shaped spiritstone thrumming intensely with energy. The summons was answered in little more than a heartbeat. Dropping the pouch back underneath my shirt, I set off at a trot to meet Murdell.

Sparrows flitted through the trees with barely a sound. The humidity was climbing rapidly and perspiration accumulated along my hairline. I clearly felt the changes in the atmosphere and dark clouds were swiftly overtaking the gray. The Aspectia were brewing up a storm. The nature fairy Pea Peckle had introduced me to these ancient nature beings. The Aspectia are the spirits that pour forth the rain and craft the blankets of snow. Cloud artists and wind makers, they are all aspects of Earth and sky.

I hurried around the west side of the shimmering pool, and there next to the tallest oak in the forest stood my sworn protector, Murdell. As always, the sight of the massive black bear sent chills of admiration up my spine.

“Hello, Murdell,” I greeted.

“Hello, Lily.” The bear’s piercing eyes were locked with mine. Without pause, Murdell asked, “What is your need?”

Hair stood out on the back of my neck. Swiftly swiping at my goose flesh, I looked around nervously. “I’ve noticed strange markings on several of the trees in this forest lately. Do you know what I mean?” They consisted of four sharp lines that equal distance from each other formed a wavy vertical design. About eight inches long, but only two inches wide, the strange etchings abruptly curled up in the shape of a J at the bottom.

“I believe I do. But the scent of the creature that created them is not familiar to me.”

“They’re not manmade?”

“No human I’ve ever smelled.”

Like an exclamation to his words, lightning flashed, then immediate ground shaking thunder. Flinching, I moved closer to Murdell and felt the coarse fur of his body against my bare flesh. He tensed, radiating primal power and heat.

When Murdell said, “We’d better head for cover,” I remembered we were standing under one of the best conductors of lightning in the forest.

Sprinting, I chanced a glance over my shoulder and saw that my friend had already disappeared into the dense foliage. I sensed his good-bye, and in return, I wished him well. Murdell could shield me from many things, but not the weather.

The temperature plummeted abruptly, and before I made it around the pond, the wind arrived, with a vengeance. Howling, it whipped my hair across my face stinging my eyes. Trees cracked and swayed, reaching out to me like snapping whips lashing my bare skin. Branches littered the trail in front of me, and the forest no longer looked familiar. Where had the path gone? Though I loved these woods, my surroundings seemed alien and threatening. The only illumination came from the lightning. Stabbing bolts burned leaves to ash, and fed by the wind, several trees blazed uncontrollably. I felt panic overtaking me. The atmosphere crackled with energy, and the hair on my arms and legs stood at attention. The inability to adjust my eyes between intense hammering strikes only added to my confusion. I became so disoriented, I stopped moving.

Through the wind and lightning’s static, I heard a loud hissing *jcherrrr*, *jcherrrr*, *jcherrrr* coming from behind me. I spun around but only saw the frantic thrashing of the trees. The sound grew louder to my left, but a twisting glance was fruitless.

Terrified I ran but almost immediately stumbled and fell. I was temporarily blinded as lightning impaled a tree right in front of me, and I screamed. Close to the base of its trunk was a sharp J-shaped marking that glowed red. Panting, I groaned and sprang back up running faster. But I didn't make it far before tripping and falling hard.

Shaking, I sat, knees upright. I wrapped my arms around my legs, rocking back and forth. I had to loosen the hold my fear had on me. Its grip was so tight my intestines spasmed. As the hissing got louder, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to remember the songs the Aspectia had taught me. Though the rain had yet to fall, I could feel the damp chill that preceded its inevitability. Grasping hold of the Bear's Spiritstone, the lyrics finally came. I sang then. The melodies drowned out the hissing, and I began to relax.

Opening my eyes, my fear receded, and still, I sang. I remembered and paid homage to the Aspectia with their songs of rain and storm. As I opened my soul to their voice, I reached for the heavens. The storm did not stop, but it calmed, and the lightning no longer crashed to the ground. Instead, the jagged light snaked horizontally across the sky. As the winds stilled, heavy rain doused the forest and extinguished the fires. And still, I sang.

I stood and reached my arms out, swaying to an ancient rhythm. The cool water cleansed my body and tasted fresh on my lips. The hissing stopped and with it the lightning. Then I sang of the sun and its warm rays, of blue skies and high clouds. The atmosphere changed, and the rain became light sprinkles. And still, I sang.

I glimpsed something from my peripheral that darted to the right, but I was unable to follow its fast exit. The creature whispered, "*Jcherrr*," and I smelled a sulfuric odor. At once, I sensed that they were the beings that had put the unusual markings on the trees. Not liking the energy that was left in the hissing creatures wake, I sang louder to the Aspectia, rejoicing in the comfort that they exuded.

Still singing, I slowly backtracked through the wet, broken forest. Then, I crouched down in front of the fractured tree that wore the J-shaped signature. The etching no longer glowed. I ran tentative fingers along the lines and grooves, surprised at how smooth they felt. There were no splinters or ragged edges where the markings had blazed. Now they appeared to have an orangey hue at their depth. Strange, the other symbols were yellow, red, green, and blue, reminiscent of the colors painted on the balls and mallets in our family's croquette set. Somehow, I didn't think that these creatures, these *Jer's*, whatever they were or wherever they came from, were playing a game though. If they were, it was a dangerous and cruel one. I was sure their negative energy had something to do with the severity of the storm, and I didn't want them integrating themselves into this enchanting forest so close to my family. I had noticed the markings mere

days before. If Jer's did cause the squall, they had already taken a toll on the once pristine woodland.

I was glad I no longer sensed or smelled the malevolent beings. Closing my eyes, I thanked the Aspectia for parting the clouds and sending the warm sunshine through the canopy. The woods stood silently, in tatters. All remaining leaves glistened and dripped on the wreckage of the forest floor. Other than a blessing and prayer, there was really nothing to be done. Nature would heal itself.

Walking back toward the direction of the road, I stumbled over a hollowed rock that appeared to have been cleaved by a bolt of lightning. In half and sined where it split, a gleaming object bulged freely from its center. Stooping down, I brushed bits of debris away and exposed stunning crystal, carved into the shape of a head. Curling my lip, I picked up the five-inch skull replica and rubbed off the leaves that still clung to its considerable heft. I wiped mud out of its teeth to reveal a perfectly chiseled upper and connecting lower jaw. It looked polished and, to my eye flawlessly, accurate. At its crown, a lightning-shaped slash cut profoundly into its smooth surface and sunk deep into the crystal. At its base a silver substance was seated around a very small hole.

I stood then and looked around. Something didn't feel right. My intuition told me there was something missing. A puzzle piece I was still yet to find. Shuffling my feet in the same area, I kicked something solid. Knocking the moss away uncovered a silver hilt that protruded vertically from the ground. With little effort, I pulled the strange jagged dagger from the soft Earth.

Pivoting, I lifted the objects to the sky. Then, for the first time, I experienced an Earthquake and heard a deep rumble. It was only a small tremble but because I was opened to Earth's energy I could feel its rage. And I could sense it was directed at me! A shiver of anxiety tap danced along my spine. Trying to calm my apprehension, I carried the crystal skull and dagger to the edge of the pond and shakily rinsed the remaining soil from both.

The dripping skull gave off an aura and no longer looked gruesome. I held the precious crystal high so that the blazing sun radiated through it onto the tranquil water like a dazzling universe. In my other hand, I lifted the dagger, and the silver shimmered, reflecting light back like a blinding mirror. The objects were striking apart, but I wondered how the appearance of the crystal would change once the lightning shaped blade was seated snugly inside the gemstone. It was obvious the dagger and skull belonged together, but for what possible purpose?

Standing on the silt shore, listening to the singing birds, with a slight warm breeze drying my hair, I did not recognize the danger of the exquisite artifacts. Instead, I became mesmerized by the luminous gem until I no

longer heard the birds or felt the wind. Drawn into its vortex of swirling light, my brain felt liquid, utterly free. Swept along, as if pulled by a current in a raging river, my mind experienced love and passion, colors beyond description, and time unfettered.

At first, the skull showed me only marvelous, magical things, cascading waterfalls, crimson sunsets, magnificent sea creatures, and herds of bison. Visions of natural beauty excited and seduced me. Then without warning, I saw ugly dark images. Drowning people, rotting bodies, and forest fires were only the beginning. Bloodthirsty ancient wars and crashing planes, tsunamis, volcanoes, and tornados were just a few of the next round of devastating visions I experienced.

Then, I saw myself in a place I had never been. In that desert location, I held my hands high. In one, I grasped the dagger, and in the other, the crystal skull. Tears streamed down my aged face, and I appeared to be shouting. With the razor-sharp dagger, I swiftly carved a lightning bolt into the top of my left forearm. Then I smeared the blade with my own blood. Screaming something undecipherable, I stabbed the dripping dagger angrily into the grinning crystal. At that moment, the world shattered like broken glass.

The winds rose quickly, and the skies blackened. Though it seemed as if the bolts of sizzling electricity dare not assault me personally, lightning ripped through the atmosphere repeatedly striking rocks. Like shrapnel, bits of stone ripped through my clothes and tore my flesh. It appeared I stood fearless, legs planted hip wide. Though I couldn't hear the words, I still screamed skyward, my hair blowing wildly in the wind. I could see rocks tumbling from sheer cliffs as the ground shook, and in the next instant, it opened up to swallow me whole.

With that final mental picture, my mind broke free from the crystal's grasp. Immediately, I dropped the skull and dagger into the water and fell to my knees. In the mud, I retched over and over, and my head buzzed. Fighting nausea, I strained to stay conscious.

Holy crap— I knew this was going to be hard, but why would I do that to myself? *Was that crazy person what I am going to become?*



2 SOUND ADVICE

Not knowing what to do with the skull and dagger and not entirely sure if I wanted to touch them again, I called, “Pea Peckle, I need you.” Like a snap of the fingers, my teacher appeared. Wings resembling a damselfly, elongated appendages, and slim of body, this purest being of light flew as if effortlessly suspended in air.

“Hello, Lily.” The transparent fairy never seemed to be surprised to hear from me. Peckle appeared forever tranquil and balanced with an underlying exuberance.

“Hello.” Working hard not to cringe, I was already relaying the visions I had so recently witnessed. I did not have to speak because Pea Peckle could easily see what I was thinking.

Reaching down, I carefully extracted the dagger from the pond but stayed clear of the crystal. Lifting the dripping blade and pointing at the submerged skull, I tried to keep my voice leveled. “What are these things?”

“You have found the Mindstone.”

Though founts of knowledge, most nature beings had to be prodded before they offer enlightenment. Urging further explanation, I said, “It’s dangerous, isn’t it?”

“It’s not meant to be, but as with most tools, they can be used for harm.”

“Tools?”

“You experienced both aspects of the crystal. Some were pleasant, while others sickened you.”

I learned long ago nature did not really see things in right or wrong or in good or bad terms as we humans do. To them, the things that happened just were the way they were.

Not wanting to forget, I questioned, “Before you tell me anymore about the Mindstone, could you please tell me where the markings on the trees are coming from?”

With a tilt of the head, Peckle said, “The beings that created the markings are other dimensional. They are using the poplar trees in the forest as portals to the Earth’s plane.”

I hadn't realized until the Fey, or fairy, told me, but the signatures were only on that particular kind of tree. "Is there some significance for the type of tree they use?"

"The link is with the name of the plane on which they exist, Populus, which is also the genus of tree the poplar resides. Although there is much power in a name, that alone would not give these creatures the ability to travel into our dimension. The Jers, as you have thought of them, are actually known as Doolies in their world. The creatures are of low intelligence and appear in a dark vaporous form but are capable of shape shifting, so they hide easily from view. They vibrate at a much lower energy level than everything in this dimension. Because of that, they would need assistance to move to and from the Earth."

Wrinkling my nose, I said, "I never did get a look at them, but they smelled like sulfur."

Without elaboration, Pea Peckle said, "Yes, their dimension would be considered foul by human standards."

After a sigh, I said, "Do you think they were looking for the Mindstone?"

"They do not have the intelligence nor would they have any use for it, but whoever helped them to travel here might."

"Well, someone's angry. I felt the Earth shake from its fury when I picked up the artifacts. What can make the Earth quake like that?"

"Other than natural occurrences, very few Earth beings can do that, Lily. It takes immense power to cause the Earth to tremble. With the other abilities this specter has exhibited, the field is narrowed considerably. But we will still need proof before challenging the powerful creature."

Though nature believed I was destined to guard the planet from doom, none of Earth's spirits seemed to know exactly where the threat lay, or if they did, they weren't talking.

Appearing perplexed, the fairy continued, "I do not understand how this being could have become corrupted."

"If that being is so powerful, why would it want the Mindstone?"

"I could not say exactly but possibly to keep it from you. You have procured it much sooner than was predicted."

I looked down. The crystal shimmered seductively in the shallow water. I said, "Really, it's more like I stumbled over it. Please, Pea Peckle, tell me more about the skull."

"The Mindstone is an ancient tool used kind of like a lightning rod. Although it could conduct electrical current, it was actually created to draw the consciousness of the universe into itself. By inserting the dagger in the crystal, its power is enhanced."

With a slight scowl, I said, "Gypsy fortunetellers use crystal balls in the old movies. I thought that was make-believe."

“Crystal may be used as an instrument to help induce one’s own abilities to retrieve information, but the Mindstone is different. The silver alloy seated at the skull’s base is the same as the metal in the dagger. This alloy was created purely by nature. The metal was not weakened by blending, but instead, it made a very powerful conductor. It acts somewhat like an antenna. These tools negate the necessity to attain a heightened psychological state in order to seek past, present, and future knowledge.”

“So it is a crystal ball.”

“Most myths have a basis of truth. Crystal skulls hold much information, but for the right person, they are also a healing tool. Once fully charged, this Mindstone can tap into the other existing crystal skulls no matter how near or far away they may be. The value in these tools is in the ease at which they can be used and some of the miraculous occurrences they can produce.”

Pointing at the Mindstone, I said, “But when I held the skull up to the sun, it took over my mind.”

“You did not know what you held. With little conscious effort, you can direct these tools as the need arises.”

“But what I saw—”

“Lily, the future is never concrete. You know you always have a choice.”

“The blood—why did the blood cause such destruction?”

“It wasn’t just the blood. It was also the words that you spoke in the vision you saw. Consider the one who would not want you to have these implements. Possibly that being thought if you believed those images were prophecy, you would fear these tools and not want to use them. Your visions could have been manipulated.”

“How will I be able to keep them safe? What can I do if more Doolies come looking for the crystal skull and dagger?”

“The menace overestimated the abilities of the Doolies. With their low energy levels and lack of intellect, they would probably never have found the Mindstone. Though they are crude, they would not directly inflict injury upon you.”

“What about the storm? They felt so negative. I thought they made it worse.”

“Their negativity did have an effect on the storm, but it was not a willful act. It was more a result. This is where the Mindstone will be of value. If you direct it, it can raise the vibration around very low energy beings.”

“But I can’t carry it everywhere I go.”

“Of course not, but you can keep a constant link with the Mindstone. Lily, hold the dagger up and look at the very bottom of the hilt. Do you see etching in the shape of a ring? If you pull at the outside edge of the circular sphere, the ring will come free.”

There was indeed a delicate swirl pattern etched deeply into the silver alloy. I only had to tug at it for a few moments before I felt the ring pop loose. Glancing at Pea Peckle, I already knew upon which digit to wear it. It fit my right index finger perfectly. The moment I put it on, my concept of the world turned upside down. For quite some time, I had tried to see all things and people in a positive vane, the way that nature did. With that ring, and the stone's connection, I felt I finally could.

"Wow, I feel like I am in some kind of optimistic bubble or something."

Winking, Pea Peckle said, "I sense the link is very strong."

Waving my hand, I said, "What if my mind takes off again?"

"Just direct the Mindstone with thought. It will come naturally after a while. But at first, you will need to make a conscious effort. Really, it's no different than your mind telling your body that you want it to stand up, run, or walk. Just tell the stone what you want."

"Do you mean like making a wish?"

"No, a wish is an uncertain endeavor. Make it a directive. If you lay a hand on a fellow human or an animal and you wish to raise their energy vibration, it may increase but only slightly. Make it a directive, and their vibration will soar. With your mind, see the person happier, the plant greener, or animal healing quickly, and in most cases, it is done."

"Some of the things I saw were exciting, but I'm not sure I want to know that much. A lot must have happened in the past, but I'm pretty sure some was the future, but so much of it was horrible."

"The crystal will not lead you. Though used as a tool of knowledge, it is capable of assisting you. It can show you secrets of the Earth and sky as well as world events. But the future is always subject to transformation. Nothing is certain. Anyone can change their mind and, in doing so, alter a timeline. As tempting as it might be, I would not advise you to rely solely on the Mindstone. Again, it is only a tool, albeit a powerful one."

Sounding weak to my own ears, I said, "How can I keep the being that wants to hurt me from entering the skull?"

"With the ring, you will be able to override the visions that may be conjured in order to misdirect you."

"How, Pea Peckle?"

"Ask the crystal for authentic images. It will be done."

"Can the Mindstone help to keep that demon from my dreams?"

"I'm not certain. But give the instruction, and it may be possible. It might take some practice to find the right phrasing."

Biting my lip, I spun the ring with my thumb and said, "Okay, I'll try. But I'm still not sure I want to use them."

"Nature guided the artisan who shaped these ancient tools. Holding them is a high honor. Because you have found them much earlier than foreseen, it is possible that you may need them soon."

Rubbing my temple, I sighed again. “Where should I keep them?”

“They will be safe in your home. The Doolies will not venture there.”

There was no need to question the fairy’s advice, but I wasn’t sure I wanted the skull and dagger in our house.

Knowing my thoughts, Pea Peckle said, “Ask the skull where it will be secure.”

The image of the square wooden box I had stowed on my bookcase headboard was vibrant. With its lid removed, I could see the crystal nestled in the mountain sage I had picked on the last ride along with my father. As that vision cleared, next I saw the dagger tucked neatly beside my journals in my most beloved gift. The beautiful chest was hand-carved with calla lilies and a delicate hovering hummingbird. The intricate scroll work Colleen had engraved on the inside of the lid was instantly recognizable. Colleen had given the chest to me for my twelfth birthday. Once our closest neighbor, she was my mentor in nature and all things tranquil before she passed away. Our weekly lunches had been a highlight in my young life. With those revelations, my reservations evaporated completely.



3 FRIENDS AND FAMILY

My ride home was a bit dubious. Tucking the dagger into the back pocket of my shorts wasn't a problem, but my damp T-shirt wasn't the best sling for the heavy crystal skull. Though the muddy gravel road presented a challenge, the short trip home proved uneventful.

It was still early, but someone might be up. So as I passed through the carport, I grabbed my softball mitt and concealed the crystal skull inside. Just as I finished sliding the dagger into the thumb portion of the glove, my father startled me as he came out the glass sliding door. Hoping he hadn't seen me hide either of the objects, I stammered, "Hey—hey, Dad. I didn't see you there."

"Good morning, Lily. Where have you been? I was just coming to look for you."

Not wanting to lie, I croaked, "I was out."

Peering at my damp clothes, he said, "I can see that. It looks as if you were caught out in the storm. Lily, you know how dangerous that is. What were you thinking?"

Hugging the ball mitt, I said, "I'm sorry if I worried you. It just kind of came up suddenly." Grinning sheepishly, I added, "It was a doozey, wasn't it?" I knew how much my father loved storms. We sat side by side on the porch many times, watching them bedazzle the darkness as they huffed and puffed their way across the sky.

"It's what woke me. It also woke your sister."

Crap, Abigail hated storms. Since we shared a room, even at eleven, she still liked to climb in my bed whenever the windows rattled. *Busted*—trying to defuse the situation, I said, "I ate and took care of the chickens already."

Glancing in the direction of my muddy bike, my father scowled. "Were you down to the pond when that storm hit?"

Looking sideways, I bit my lip. He shook his head and said, "The next time a thunderstorm like that whistles through, you had better be sitting beside me on the porch. Now go tell your mother you're home." He raised one eyebrow when he saw me tighten my grip on the ball glove. I was half afraid the grinning skull would start to glow or shout to him through its gritted teeth.

Barely managing a smile, I quickly slipped through the open door and mumbled, “Yes, sir. I will, right away.”

~

The weather had cleared beautifully, and we were all in high spirits after our picnic lunch. Glen Lake was one of our family’s favorite places to fish and relax. That afternoon though, we had exchanged poles for bats and were involved in a rowdy game of softball. Our cousins and a few townies helped to even out the teams.

After I hid the crystal skull and dagger safely away from prying eyes, I oiled my softball mitt to avoid any questions about bringing the glove into the house. Now I pounded the primed leather and loudly badgered one of the locals in unison with the rest of the team.

“Hey, batter, batter— swing!”

I knew full well where the ball was going before Jason Tester ever swung. So I raced back and to my left in order to put myself in a perfect position before the softball dropped from the sky. Shouts and screams followed my effortless catch, and I threw the ball straight to Abigail at third base in order to keep my sixteen-year-old brother, Randy, from stealing. More cheers followed. I bent over, putting my hands on my knees. Then I pulled the brim of my ball cap down to hide my smile of satisfaction. The ring’s connection with the Mindstone had easily given me a clear picture of the last several plays.

“With power comes responsibility.” That was something I had heard more than once from my parents. I knew it was wrong to continue to use the ring only for the benefit of our team. But it was fun for the short time that I had. I wasn’t nearly as good at anticipating the ball’s trajectory without the crystal’s help. Fair is fair though, so I played the rest of the game the respectable way. As it turned out, the plays I made honestly were more satisfying anyhow.

The last inning completed, my mother shouted to Andrew, Abigail’s twin, and me, “Hey, Lily, Andy, please go get the last cooler out of the back of the car.”

Andrew caught the auto keys in midair as we walked toward the station wagon. Glancing at me out of the corner of his eye, he said, “So what was going on in the third inning?”

“What do you mean, Andy?” I had been in leftfield, and he had played center.

“Come on, Lily. You were moving before Jason swung his bat. What gives?”

Trying not to look down, I twisted my new ring with my thumb and said, “I don’t know? It was a good guess.” I was going to have to be more careful around him. He understood me better than anyone else, but I wasn’t ready to talk about the skull and dagger, not even to Andrew. Laughingly, I

added, "I wasn't so good at guessing in the fifth inning." Because I had missed an easy pop fly the other team scored two home runs.

He agreed with a shove. "Yeah, that was pretty bad."

As we hefted the cooler out and I closed the wide back door of the station wagon, I said, "You had a couple of bobbles out there yourself, twinkle toes."

After I gave a light shove of the cooler in Andrew's direction, his searching demeanor evaporated. With a squawk, he said, "Hey." He turned around, and we continued to razz each other on our way back to the picnic area. Only a few yards from the tables, I almost rammed the ice chest up Andrew's backside.

"Man, Lily, what are you doing? This thing is heavy."

"Sorry, I tripped." That was a bald-faced lie. I faltered for an entirely different reason. We set the cooler down, and I worked hard not to gawk openly.

I had never seen a more beautiful boy anywhere, not even on the television or movie screen. He only stood about fifteen feet away, but his energy blazed toward me like a molten sun. He loosely held a fishing pole and was having an animated conversation with my eighteen-year-old sister, Shelley's latest boyfriend, Nathan Cox.

While he spoke, he glanced my way and did a small double take. It was not in my demeanor to be self-conscious, but I looked down nonetheless to see if I was covered in filth from our ball game. Crap, my socks and knees were both stained. Reaching up, I could feel my hair spilling out of my ball cap and the frazzled ponytail that hung out the back. Then, I felt heat as my face flushed. I looked back in his direction, and as our eyes met, he smiled and winked. Embarrassed, I returned a weak grin and then headed in the direction of the restrooms.

"Lily, wait a minute."

I stopped moving. It was Nathan who asked me to hold up. After taking a deep breath, I turned around. I hadn't heard them walk up behind me, so I was thrown a little off balance by their close proximity. The handsome new arrival reached out to steady me, and my skin tingled where his hand held my arm. It took great effort not to snatch it away and run.

As if he sensed my wariness, the stranger smiled reassuringly and said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you—*Lily*."

The way he waited, and then said my name slowly, almost made me squeak. I felt like a deer in the headlights. What mesmerizing headlights. He had eyes the color of turquoise and fine golden hair that glistened in the sunlight. The way he smelled made my knees go weak. He seemed familiar somehow, and yet, I knew I had never before laid eyes on him.

Nathan spoke as he looked back and forth between us. "Lily, the new boy in town wanted an introduction."

Before he could finish, gorgeous smiled wide and said, “I’m John Wayne.”

I stifled a laugh with my hand. Without any show of irritation, he said, “Yeah, I get that a lot.” Regrettably though, he finally released my arm.

Feeling the heat of another flush, I said, “I’m sorry— you’re serious.”

Tilting his head a bit, he lifted an eyebrow and a shoulder. “He was my mother’s favorite actor. What can I say?”

“Hi, John, guess that makes us almost even. Lily Bud sounds like something out of a children’s book.”

“Why did you say almost?”

“Well, for an awkward pause, few names beat John Wayne except maybe Elvis Presley or Mahatma Gandhi.”

I liked the way the corners of his eyes wrinkled when he guffawed. My father walked over then and asked to be introduced. John stood with a confident nonchalance that made him seem older and larger than his average stature. My dad was a full head taller than he was, but John held his own while they conversed. His eyes never wandered from my father’s face. John gave my dad his full attention, the same way he had when he had talked to me. Suddenly, I felt foolish. He was just being polite with me the same way he was with everyone. Even so, it was hard not to stare.

Dad glanced over and said, “Lily, your mother wants your help getting supper ready for the troops.”

Standing on my tiptoes, I saluted my father and answered, “Sure, Dad, right away.” Spinning on my heels, I started over to where my mother was setting out the evening meal. Before I reached the tables, I felt a soft tug on my arm. With a start, I looked over my shoulder into a pair of captivating eyes. John purred, “See you later—*Lily*.”

~



4 NATURAL CONNECTIONS

“Lily, Lillee—you have lost. You are nothing.” In a trance, I walked through an arid wasteland that smelled of death. The sky was heavy with the sickening color of mucus. My chest ached from the wrenching pain of loss. The diseased plants that still existed wept odorous sap from their cankerous wounds. My despair was crushing.

UnEarthly voices proclaimed my ruin, chanting “You have lost. You are nothing. The Earth will die and you with it.”

Jerking awake, I gasped. My face and pillow were soaked with tears, and my shallow breaths could not keep up with the beat of my heart. I knew I had a fever without touching my forehead. The moisture that prickled the top of my lip extended to the rest of my body and saturated my pajamas.

“Oh crap.” The horrible dreams had started again, and I hadn’t found any kind of relief from the Mindstone. I had tried for over a week without results. Frustrated, I stopped working with the skull.

Abbey’s bed was vacated, and the clock on my nightstand read seven forty-five. Yawning, I threw back my damp blankets and headed for the bathroom. While I brushed my teeth, I gazed into the mirror. My mousy brown hair lay in long, listless clumps around my thin face, and dark circles ringed my kelly green eyes. Brightly crimson cheeks reflected my coursing fever. Pulling my fleshy lips back in a grimace that revealed slightly crooked teeth, I was glad to see my gums retained their normal shade of pink. I poked gently at my puffy eyes. *How can I only be fifteen?*

Ignoring the aspirin in the medicine chest, I reached for the pond lily essence and squeezed a few drops under my tongue. With the simple words of my prayer, I felt some relief as the fire that filled me earlier died to low embers with each heartbeat. Closing my eyes, I solemnly breathed the words, “Thank you.”

I was the last to enter the kitchen for breakfast.

Andrew lifted his eyebrows questioningly. “Wow, Lily, bad night?”

With a scowl, I shushed him. “Hey, Andrew, did you hear the birds singing this morning?”

It had been less than a year since I gave him his Spiritstone, and he had gained an even better understanding of nature. Since then “Birds singing” was our code for “Meet me under the willow.”

Andrew nodded. “Sure did.” No one else noticed our exchange, so breakfast went on as usual.

Mom said, “Your father will be home tonight around seven, so I want some help today.”

With his mouth half-full, Randy mumbled, “Sorry, Mom, but Tony needs me to rake his north field of hay.”

Shelley asked, “Can Nathan come for supper tonight?”

With a look of surprise, Mom said, “Is it that serious?”

Shelley gave the usual reply, “Come on, Mom.”

Smiling, Mom said, “Sure, ask Nathan to supper.” Then she reminded Abigail, “It’s your turn to wash dishes this week, Abbey.”

Abigail didn’t answer. But the expression on her face looked a lot like the one Andrew made whenever he was unhappy.

It was 1978, and my father had been an over-the-road truck driver since before any of us were born. This scene had played out, with slight variations, every couple of weeks for as long as I could remember.

After setting my dishes in the sink, I said, “Mom, I’ve got a few things to do after I’m done with the chickens, but I’ll be back to help.”

“That’s fine, Lily. Could you weed the flower beds on the west and south end of the house before you come in?”

“Sure Mom, see yah.” Out the back door, I jogged through the carport and into the thick green grass.

After I fed the chickens and collected eggs, I quickly walked toward the apple orchard. I offered many good morning wishes as I passed by trees and flowers. The air was sweet, and the birds heralded a lovely clear day of warm sunshine.

Past the orchard, I walked through a fragrant meadow on my way to my morning’s destination. The massive willow’s trunk was over four feet across. Its supple branches were incredibly full, and they extended all the way to the ground about ten feet from its center. The effect was that of a huge constantly swaying umbrella.

I was only four years old the first time the tree had requested my company. It was like a melody. Willow called me away from a pile of dirt I was digging up as I played in the garden. Under its branches, the tree offered secrets and sanctuary. Willow remained my most important source of balance and nonjudgmental friendship.

When I ducked under Willow’s canopy, I wasn’t surprised Andrew was waiting. Before saying anything to him, I walked straight up to the tree and hugged as much of its girth as I could get my arms around and sighed. “Good morning, Willow.”

Andrew's look of concern was evident. "You must have had a really bad night."

Willow said, "Good morning, Lily. Do not let your dreams bring about undo worry. You should not concern yourself with that which has not taken place." Having been acquainted with Willow most of my life, I learned early on that the tree knew more about what happened around it than anyone could have imagined.

Andrew quizzed, "Was the dream different than the others?"

"It was worse, but that's not why I wanted to talk to you. Have you been noticing anything different about the Spiritstone?"

We both carried a Spiritstone, each carved in the likeness of their spirit animal. The stones held a small but vital part of the embodied species energy, magic, and power.

When Colleen passed away, I had the task of finding the person who would be the next caretaker of the Hummingbird Spiritstone. After two years of indecision, my soul finally showed me the truth. Since the end of last summer when I presented Andrew with it, he had become a welcomed ally.

Andrew reached for the leather pouch underneath his shirt. It hung from a medium-weight silver chain that I knew lay against his heart. His was identical to the one I wore. He asked, "Like, what do you mean?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me."

Tipping the tiny hummingbird relic out of its pouch, Andy looked into the dazzling spectacle for a time and quietly studied the stone. I knew what he was seeing because I had seen the vision many times before I relinquished the talisman to him. When I had last looked at the magical Spiritstone, I had watched iridescent hummingbirds, of different colors, fly one after another into the bright center of the stone. "Sorry, Lily, but I don't see anything different, and it's still vibrating the same."

"Okay, good. It's probably nothing. Chances are it's just these rotten dreams."

"What aren't you telling me, Lily?"

Though he knew a lot about my abilities, many of which he shared, there were still many things that Andrew didn't yet know. But I didn't want to involve him until I knew what I was up against. "Like Willow said, it's nothing to be concerned about. Maybe it's just close to that time of the month."

"Ugh, shut up! If you're not going to tell me, I've got some things to do in the barn."

Willow and I both laughed at Andrew's quick retreat. "*Ha, ha, ha.* He's so easy to gross out."

After Willow's musical mirth stopped, the tree spoke again. Its vocalization was like a song filled with wind, echoes, and whispered squeaks

that blended into a perfect sonata. “Lily, I do not recognize the darkness of your dream.”

“Willow, I need to stop these nightmares. What if I can’t stop the being that wants to destroy Earth?”

“Lily, you know that nature does not exist in a world of speculation.”

“It’s not just the dreams. It’s the fevers too. You and the other plant spirits have helped with that but they don’t go away entirely. I think I’m going to have to talk to Loam.”

~

Weeding through some of the annuals on the south side of the house, I had a lively conversation with the multi-colored Columbines and chattier daffodils.

A columbine said, “*The aspectia quenched our thirst with heavy dew.*”

I replied, “Well, you all look beautiful this morning.”

Several flowers offered, “*Thanks,*” for the praise.

Then, with whispers of concern, as if I could not hear them, the delicate stems of color spoke. “*She is a little pallid this morning, the poor thing.*”

“*She feels a bit warm too.*”

“Hey, I can hear you.” With a chuckle, I pulled another weed and gave thanks for all they had offered. Then, I prayed for their return into the Earth, so that they might nourish those that still lived and those still to come.

The link we all have with the Earth and all those that inhabit above and below its mantle had been steadily returning to my memory since I first began to communicate with Willow. But it was Colleen that encouraged and fed that interest. She had such a sweet, earnest nature. My recollections and love for her were still strong. At age ten, I was not sure what to make of her comment: “One day, you will understand the jokes of the daisies and be invited to hear the stories of the daffodils.”

In the five years since, I’ve learned she didn’t tell me even half of what could happen if I opened myself up to nature. I had no idea how right she was or how things would change shortly after my twelfth birthday. That was the summer Mrs. Colleen Lily Harrison died. Only weeks after she gifted me the carved box, I found her mortal remains, on one of our regular Tuesday lunch dates, in the cottage my aunt now owned. It was the worst day of my life. She had been my teacher and best friend for several years, and I was heartbroken after her soul left this world. But the afternoons I shared with Colleen had given me a treasure trove of memories.

The flax on the west side of the house beamed happily as I complimented their lovely sky blue blossoms. How I loathed the job of weeding when I was younger. Now I enjoyed the time I had to visit with Earth and its creatures. While I reflected, I felt a strong vibrational tug from the invisible pendant at my throat. Encapsulated in the necklace was a

token given directly to me from the planet; it held a portion of Earth's violet eternal flame. A moment later, a warm jolt directed me, "*Find your way to the Cruin.*" I guessed I would be speaking with the Cruin Loam, the keeper of the flame and the guard to the doorway of Earth's soul, much sooner than I had anticipated.

I quickly finished with the flowerbeds and silently made my way to the carport to retrieve my bike. After sensing the coast was clear, I sped to the end of the driveway and took a right onto Maple Road.

The three quarter-mile stretch of road between our house and the cottage on the corner was a natural wonder. Dense forest separated the properties. Plump asparagus and dogwood lined the fence along the ditch, and not far from that, I could see the beginning of the blossoms on the black cap briers. The air was warming up, and my tires left a thin dusty trail in their wake. Daisies were beginning to show themselves in the field across the road from the beloved cottage. I greeted the giggling white bonneted flowers and surveyed the lush rolling pasture.

One of the voluptuous blooms said, "*The Cruin is waiting.*" The other bonnets tittered and bobbed their crowns in agreement. Several flowers sung to me in a choir of offerings, "*We would love to grace your table. We would happily bless your home.*"

With a nod, I said, "Thank you. Your blessings are greatly appreciated."

I walked my bike up the heavy aggregate driveway past the whimsical stone mailbox. From there a stone walkway meandered to the front porch steps and then around the house on the right side, all the way to the backyard patio. Between each flat, odd-shaped stone, the cracks were filled with short Corsican mint. The spring-green spider web of color that connected the stones of the path and the patio stones in the backyard released a sweet, refreshing peppermint scent with each step.

On either side of the path were orange zinnias and purple ageratum, in drifts of beautiful contrasting color. There was very little lawn to be cared for because most of the space around the home was filled with different tiers of colored leaf and flowering perennials meant to encourage the butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds to share the yard.

The stone cottage had not changed much since Colleen left it to my aunt, Janet. It was a marvel of stone and wood. The exterior walls were covered in a multitude of colored flat stones that fit almost perfectly together. A small, rounded, winsome turreted section projected out the left hand side of the house, also made of stone. All of the windows were rounded at the top, with thick wood trim, and the window on the turret, facing the road, had a window box filled with yellow and red begonias. There were cedar shake shingles on all of the roofs including the roof on the rounded turret that resembled an upside down sugar cone.

The garage was set back from the house, a bit to the left and built with the same stone. It had two heavy wooden, rounded top doors and on each at about chest height were very large round cast iron door pulls. The garage's roof had the same pitch as the house and matching shake shingles. The driveway leading up to the garage was trimmed in delicate purple flowers that met the lawn.

The most amazing, and truly my favorite part of that charming cottage, was its front door. It was made of some kind of heavy, reddish honey-toned wood, rounded at the top like the windows, and edged with the same thick wood trim. On the door was a carving of a beautiful pair of male and female lions. They were so intricate; they looked like they were going to walk right out of the door, straight out onto the porch. I found out on my twelfth birthday only weeks before her death that my treasured friend Colleen had been the carver.

Following the driveway along the left side of the house, I laid my bike out of sight. After peaking in the garage to make sure my Aunt Janet's car was gone, I approached the back of the turret. The latch on the door that led inside appeared to shine brilliantly. It had been a year since the last time I walked over that threshold. Each time I entered the turret, the experience was different. With anticipation, I wondered what I would find beyond the door.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cecilia Johnson lives on the wild rivers coast of Oregon with her husband Mickey and their two furry companions, Leroy and Gracie. Her family, nature, exploring, and creating beauty are among her greatest passions. Writing is Cecilia's favorite way to tap into the universe's warehouse of magical ideas, but walking the beaches or hiking the many spectacular trails of the Oregon coastline with her family keep her grounded in Earth's grand realm.

On any given day you might find Cecilia picking up garbage on a road, beach, or with the Trash dogs, a local cleanup crew that is very enthusiast about a healthy and beautiful environment. Cecilia encourages each and every one to take the time to watch a bird, the stars, or an ant on the sidewalk. Even the blades of grass beg your notice. The World awaits.

I hope you enjoyed reading 'Secrets in Stone' as much as I did writing it. If so, you might be interested in the other two books in the In Stone Series. In book one, 'Energy in Stone', find out how Lily's odyssey into nature began. 'Name in Stone', book three, is the final novel in the series. Lily's challenges mount; in her last stand she leaves you with a closing revelation and a sense of wonder.

You can find links to all novels on my website at CeciliaJohnsonAuthor.com.

Reviews are always appreciated.

Wishing you much laughter, and the good fortune to find magic and wonder wherever you may be.

Cecilia Johnson

