

Stefan's diaries: origins chapter 21



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The next morning, Damon left with the brief explanation that he was helping the militia at the camp. I wasn't sure I believed his excuse, but the house was decidedly more peaceful in his absence. Katherine came over each night to play cribbage with Father. Occasionally I'd join her as a two-against-one team. While playing, Katherine would tell Father stories from her past: about her father's shipping business; about her Italian mother; about Wheat, the Scottish terrier she'd had as a girl. I wondered if any of them were true, or if it was Katherine's plan to act as a modern-day Scheherazade, spinning stories that would eventually persuade Father to spare her.

Katherine would always make a show of going back to the carriage house, and it was agony waiting for the moment when Father went to bed so that I could follow her. She never talked about her past--or her plans--with me. She didn't tell me how she got her nourishment, and I didn't ask. I didn't want to know. It was far easier to pretend she was just a normal girl.

One afternoon, when Father was in town with Robert, discussing business with the Cartwrights, Katherine and I decided to spend an entire day together, instead of a few stolen, dark hours. It was nearing October, but no one would know it from the high temperatures and the daily late-afternoon thunderstorms. I hadn't gone swimming all summer, and I couldn't wait to feel the water of the pond on my skin--and Katherine in my arms in the daylight. I stripped down and jumped in immediately.

"Don't splash!" yelled Katherine. She lifted her simple blue skirt up to her ankles and cautiously stepped toward the edge of the pond. She'd already

left her muslin flats beneath the willow tree, and I couldn't stop staring at the delicate white of her ankles.

"Come in! The water's fine!" I yelled, even though my teeth were chattering.

Katherine continued to tiptoe toward the edge of the pond until she was standing on the muddy strip between the grass and the water. "It's dirty." She wrinkled her nose, shielding her eyes from the sun.

"That's why you have to get in. To wash off all the mud," I said, using my fingers to flick water toward Katherine. A few droplets landed on the bodice of her dress, and I felt desire course through me. I dunked under the water to cool my head.

"You're not afraid of a little splashing," I said as I emerged, my hair dripping on my shoulders. "Or, shall I say, you're not afraid of splashing Stefan?" I felt a little bit ridiculous saying it, because such comments didn't sound nearly as clever on my lips. Still, she did me the favor of laughing. I carefully sidestepped the rocks on the bottom of the pond to walk closer toward her, then flicked more water in her direction.

"No!" Katherine shrieked, but she made no move to run away as I walked out of the pond, grabbed her around the waist, and carried her into the water.

"Stefan! Stop!" she screamed as she clung to my neck. "At least let me take off my dress!"

At that, I immediately let her go. She lifted her hands over her head, allowing me to easily pull off her dress. There she stood in her little white slip. I gaped in amazement. Of course I'd seen her body before, but it had always been in shadows and half-light. Now I saw the sun on her shoulders, and the way her stomach curved inward and I knew, for the millionth time, that I was in love.

Katherine dove underwater, reemerging right next to me. " And now, revenge!" She leaned down and splashed cool water on me with all her might.

" If you weren't so beautiful, I might fight back," I said, pulling her toward me. I kissed her.

" The neighbors will talk," murmured Katherine against my lips.

" Let them talk," I whispered. " I want everyone to know how much I love you." Katherine kissed me harder, with more passion than I'd ever felt. I sucked my breath in, feeling so much desire that I stepped away. I loved Katherine so much that it almost hurt; it made it harder to breathe, harder to talk, harder to think. It was as if my desire was a force larger than myself, and I was simultaneously frightened and overjoyed to follow wherever it led me.

I took a shaky breath and looked up at the sky. Large thunderclouds had rolled in, obscuring the sky, which had been a pure cerulean just moments before. " We should go," I said, heading toward shore.

Sure enough, as soon as we stepped onto dry land, a clap of thunder rolled off in the distance.

" The storm came in fast," Katherine observed as she wrung out her curls. She didn't seem at all self-conscious even though her soaking-wet white slip left nothing to the imagination. Somehow, it seemed almost more illicit and erotic to see her scantily dressed than to see her naked. " One could think that it was almost a sign that our relationship is not meant to be." Her voice was teasing, but I felt a shiver of dread go up my spine.

" No," I said loudly, to reassure myself.

" I'm just teasing you!" Katherine kissed my cheek before leaning down to pick up her dress. As she stole behind the weeping willow tree, I yanked up my breeches and put on my shirt.

Katherine emerged from behind the tree a moment later, her cotton dress clinging to her curves, the damp tendrils of her hair sticking to her curves, the damp tendrils of her hair sticking to her back. Her skin had a bluish quality to it.

I put my arms around her and rubbed her arms vigorously, trying to warm her up, though I knew that was impossible.

" I have something to tell you," Katherine said as she tilted her face up to the open sky.

" What?" I asked.

" I would be honored to attend the Founders Ball with you," she said, and then, before I could kiss her again, she broke from my embrace and ran back to the carriage house.