

Chapter 4

Vagabond

A boy with a switch herding geese out through an open gate on the far side of the yard did not notice the stranger heading for the stone farmhouse. Bordered by a kitchen garden to either side of the flagstone, the path led to the front door swinging inward when Katie knocked, giving onto a hallway and a flight of stairs. She called out; a farmwife came halfway down the stairs and stopped there, crossing her arms over her apron while listening to the traveler explain that she was looking for work and lodging. The woman replied that she should speak to Monsieur Roscraque out in the milking barn and added that the last haying was in fact about to begin.

Nearing the barn, Katie heard clog-like hooves clacking on concrete. A yapping spaniel scurried about her, snapping at her pant cuffs, racing up the central aisle, turning, wagging its stubby tail, racing back, eager to lead her down the aisle created between the rear ends of the fawn-and-white Guernseys locked in stanchions, chrome suction cups dangling from their teats. During Katie's passage between the switching tails, the cows kept their muzzles in the troughs, having at feed mechanically, banging their sawed-off horns between the metal

bars while straining to roll their brown, vein-shot eyes toward her. Crowding in upon a gated side entrance, a dozen more milkers moored and stamped their hooves, their fleshy dewlaps pressing up against the barrier's wooden slats, their milk veins looking about to burst. The dog barked over a motor's noise and the dairyman appeared.

“*Bonjour, Monsieur Roscraq.*”

With a nod of his capped head, the farmer signaled for her to join him in a breezeway where he resumed his seat on a stool with his back turned. Katie watched him finish stripping a single Jersey heifer tied to a post. Patting its rump, Roscraq rose and turned. “There’s no milk to sell if that’s what you want.”

“I’m not here for milk. I’m looking for work and a place to stay.” The man surveyed the short-clipped hair under her sweatshirt’s hood and her soiled pants; he eyed the dilapidated cardboard guitar case lodged between her muddy boots and the backpack strapped to her back. “Madame Roscraq said you might need a hand with the haying.”

The farmer raised his right hand: the pointer and index fingers ended at the middle knuckles. “*Ouaille*, we could always use a good hand.” He set the milk pail away from the Jersey’s hooves and stepped to a slop sink where he ran steaming hot water into a plastic bucket and soaked a rag while retrieving a squirt bottle from the shelf. After he had the cow’s udders washed, he motioned for the stranger to follow him around a pile of dented metal cans and across the barnyard layered with dry and not-so-dry dung.

Hands tucked into overalls, Roscraq nudged open the door with his shoulder and shouted; the woman called back. Catching each heel on the foot scraper, he kicked off his rubber boots before sliding stocking feet into wooden sabots and preceding the guest into the mudroom off the hall, motioning for her to sit on one of two benches at a wooden table. He switched on the dangling bulb; its low-wattage did not alter the interior light; he switched it off and sat down. Katie noted the wooden cross on the plaster wall, raingear hanging from a row of wall pegs, and footwear strewn about the straw-littered concrete floor.

The woman entered with a broken loaf of rye bread, a chunk of cheese, two glasses, and a jug of milk.

“Go ahead there,” the man said. “You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

Katie guessed that the farming couple did not speak English as often as Acadian French.

“So you’re looking for work, are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Katie echoed, chewing on the bread and cheese.

“*Ouâille. Pourquoi?* What you doing in this countryside?”

“A job I had on Cape Breton Island fell through.”

“What was that?” the wife inquired from the doorway, shifting her weight and re-crossing her arms.

“Never mind that there,” Roscraç told her before he pantomimed bringing a bottle to his mouth; the woman left the room. He picked a cigarette butt out of the ashtray with his stub-fingered hand, lit it then watched Katie eat and drink.

“You know the cows, do you?”

“Not really. But your wife said something about the haying.”

Roscraç’s gaze drifted toward her gear at the door. “Tourist, are you there?”

“Tourists have money.”

“*Ouâille*, that’s true,” he said, striking another match to his extinguished cigarette. “But you’re a girl.”

“That’s true too.”

The farmwife re-entered, set an unlabeled bottle before the man and refilled the visitor’s glass with milk. Her husband poured himself red wine and—silently toasting both parties—drank it down.

“There’s work,” he declared, swiping his mouth with his sleeve and hunting for another cigarette butt.

“For me?” Katie asked.

The farm couple exchanged looks.

“If you’re strong,” he replied. “We don’t play music here.... Say, what’s your name then?”

“Katelyn.”

“Cateline what?”

“Katelyn Lowrie. Maybe I am strong enough ... Monsieur Roscraq.”

He slid his empty glass away, buried the smoldering cigarette butt in the ashtray and rose to his feet. “Let’s go see there.”

The woman nodded and blinked at Katie, gesturing that the guitar case and pack would be safe in the entryway. The man worked his feet back into his rubber boots then he and Katie walked to the open-sided lean-to on the far side of the barn where bales of hay were sheltered beneath black plastic sheets. Roscraq thrust a pitchfork into her hands. “Lift one there,” he said, pointing toward the opened end of one stacked pile, “up over your head.”

Katie stepped forward, plunged the four prongs into an exposed bale and lifted it no higher than her knees before it fell back to the ground. She dug the fork in deeper and tried again; at her waistline the loosely tied bundle dropped back down. Without glancing sideways, she replanted the tines deeper yet and bent her knees, this time managing to raise the hay as high as her shoulders before it crashed back to the ground.

Roscraq stepped forward, took hold of the fork, motioned for her to stand back and in one fell swoop hoisted the bale and held it aloft, one elbow locked and the other slightly bent, the load slightly teetering overhead. “To do the hay,” he exclaimed, “you have to lift the bale!” and let the weight thump down before propelling the fork in a shallow arc through the air, its prongs puncturing a mound of brittle plastic where they stuck in place. “There’s no work for you here,” Roscraq said, pocketing his hands and heading into the barn.

Katie went to retrieve her things and found the woman standing in the front doorway. “I’m sorry,” Mrs. Roscraq stated. “Now what will you do?”

Katie paused to study her face. “I don’t know.”

“Have you been into Mentanque Village there?”

“No, ma’am. This is the first place I came across after leaving the main road.”

“Look in at the Café Feux-Follets,” she said. “I’m hearing Madame Cozenet has lost a girl there.”

“The Feux-Follets?”

“The *crêperie*, the café in Mentanque. Ask for Madame Cozenet.”

“Thank you. I will.”

Katie took walking directions, shouldered her pack, picked up her case, and was halfway to the gate when she heard the woman calling from the threshold of the house, where she was holding out the balance of the bread loaf and cheese block wrapped in newsprint. Katie retraced her steps. They met at the end of the path. “Do you read in The Book, Cateline?”

“What book?”

“*La Sainte Bible*. Do you read in it then?” the woman asked, pressing the parcel into the traveler’s hands, stepping back, tilting her head to one side, and crossing her arms.

“I’ve read some of it.”

“And what did you learn there?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say right off.”

“*Ouâille*, you can, you can,” she replied. “Love one another. That’s what it says there.”

Katie looked at the woman standing framed between the shuttered windows to either side of the front door of her house.

“Madame Cozenet will be looking for help at the Feux-Follets,” Mrs. Roscraq reiterated. “Ask for Madame Cozenet.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Katie said, grabbing the handle of her guitar case and clasping the food package to her chest. “And for this.”

The entrance to the Café Feux-Follets was closed; two other doors along the front of the same stone building were also locked.

Katie went round to the rear courtyard where a teenage girl answered her knocks and issued her into a kitchen, its air pungent with baking buckwheat.

“*Bonjour, monsieur,*” Katie said, nodding toward an old man seated on a stool and peeling potatoes over two aluminum pails.

The teen-age girl re-stationed herself beside an older, larger woman who wore a diminutive lace headdress and a full-length bib apron; the elder woman elbowed the young girl—still distracted by the newcomer—to resume pouring batter onto the first of two griddles. The girl poured then spread the mixture paper-thin with a curved wooden tool, while the woman used a flat wooden spatula to peel a cooked *crêpe* off the second griddle. The Manx cat had paused upon the visitor’s entrance but now resumed licking the floor tiles clean of spill. Katie felt her face flush with the warmth of the interior.

“Are you Madame Cozenet?” Katie inquired of the woman.

The young girl looked up and grinned. The man snorted and wiped his nose with the cuff of his jacket.

“No no, she’s the cook,” the teenager explained without interrupting her task: pouring then smoothing batter across the griddle until it spread to the round rim’s edge then, with a quick play of her forefingers, teasing the thin pancake off the hot surface and depositing it, brown side up, onto the second cooking plate.

Katie set down her things and addressed the old man: “Are you Monsieur Cozenet?” He chuckled; Katie spied the young girl giggling until the woman used her spatula to slapped the girl’s forearm. “I’m sorry to disturb you all,” Katie raised her voice, “but are the Cozenets here?”

The woman lowered the flames, wrested the wooden bowl from the girl and set it aside. Stepping out from behind the freestanding stove—the cat hopped out of her path and leapt up into a deep-set windowsill—the cook wiped her hands on her apron and spread it across her washed-out black dress. “What does *m’oiselle* want to know?” she said in French, indicating that the teenager should translate.

The girl explained that the two older people spoke little English. “What are you looking for Madame Cozenet for anyway?”

“I understand they are the owners.”

“There’s no Monsieur Cozenet,” the girl declared. “Only Madame. She’s the only one.”

“Do you know if she’s around?”

“But no!” the cook proclaimed. “Madame is not coming into the kitchen while we are making the *ployes!*” Her hands urged the girl to translate quickly, quickly. “The hour after lunch is the hour of rest for Madame.”

The old man let plop a peeled potato in the pail with water in it.

“Madame comes into the kitchen only before the hour of lunch,” the old woman volunteered in a variant of French which Katie could only partially comprehend; the old man grumbled and let a second potato drop.

A draught stream of the fragrant *crêpes* struck Katie as she drifted toward the window, trying not to stare at the tawny stack of pancakes and instead fixing her eyes on a fly settling near the cat’s cut-off tail. “Do you know if Madame Cozenet is looking for help? I’m looking for work.”

“Here,” the young girl said, removing the top *crêpe* from the finished pile and passing it directly into the traveler’s extended bare hands. “I’ll get you a plate.”

Katie ate a second buttered *crêpe* and used the stone windowsill to support the tumbler of cider that the girl poured from a bottle of opaque green glass. “The real thing,” the girl added, jamming the cork back in the bottleneck and reclaiming the empty plate.

“Gives you gas!” the old man mumbled.

“Idiot!” the woman declared, wagging her undersized head-dress and, adjusting the burner flames, embellishing her muttering complaint with phrases Katie could not understand. The young girl served her another *crêpe*, with a heaping tablespoon of powdered sugar on top, while the older woman resumed the operation, puffing out her cheeks as she spread a thin layer of wheat batter on the newly oiled surface.

Katie sipped the bubbly, copper-toned cider and downed the third *crêpe*. The cat licked its forelegs. Scooping fruit preserve onto yet a fourth *crêpe*, the girl rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue at the older woman's back before darting over to the Katie. "Madame Cozenet comes in here around four-thirty," she whispered, delivering the plate and refilling the drinking glass. "You can stay here till then. Hey, what's your name?"

"Katie."

"Mine's Marie."

The woman barked and flapped her towel at flames flaring up around her griddle's edge.

"See you!" Marie quipped, racing to resume her place behind the stove.

Katie watched the fly land nearer and nearer the cat's whiskers until the cat closed its paws and caught it cold.

– Hello?

– *Suzanne.*

– Elise? You're sure calling early.

– *I'm sorry. I guess I am. I got up hours ago and haven't gotten back to bed.*

– What's got you going so early?

– *Never mind, that was last night. It's beautiful out now. Is it beautiful up your way? It's so clear down here after that rain. The greens are greener. The reds are redder. I could swear they are. Did you get some of our first good rain? How are you, Suzanne?*

– Have you been drinking coffee?

– *Coffee? Not me. How's Mister Mike?*

– He's fine, Elise.

– *Oh that's wonderful for you, Suzanne, just wonderful. We have to figure out Thanksgiving. It's only three weeks from now you know. Can you come down?*

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- Turns out we can. Mike and I are done wrangling. I'm just not going over to his people this year. We both want to do something different.
 - *Oh do, please do.*
 - You sure?
 - *Oh yes! Come and stay a while.*
 - Can we bring the horses? I'd love to go riding with you again.
 - *Well, I guess. Haul them down, if you can.*
 - We'll go out for a nice long ride, cowgirl.
 - *How many are there?*
 - Horses? We're only keeping two: Rocky and Rolly.
 - *Oh my! But what about Mike? If we go for a long ride that'll leave him out.*
 - Oh, Lizzie! Are you kidding? He's on top of Rocky more often than ... but never mind that, he'll be fine. He and Donnie Boy can entertain each other while we go for a good long ride.
 - *If I can even get up on a horse. It's been a while.*
 - Sure you can.
 - *And off again? What about feed?*
 - We'll bring feed. We'll bring everything: feed, tackle. Just get your spurs out, girl! All we'll need is water.
 - *I'll get Donald to clean his pollywogs out of that old bathtub, or wherever he's got going on in there.*
 - Can we stable them in the barn? Is that old barn still standing?
 - *It is, and the door still slides open and closed. But there's a stack of firewood in the way right now. Everything's all catawampus in there. I'll move things. Wait until Donald finds out guests are coming for Thanksgiving. He'll be so excited. I'll bake bread.*
 - What about letting Mike move things around when we get there?
 - *Fine. I only wish....*
 - Katie?
 - *Yes. I wish she could be here.*
- Silence*
- OK, let's have it. Did you hear from her?
 - *Not for weeks.*

- That’s just wrong.
- *It would put my mind at ease, Suze. I cannot for the life of me figure out why she needs to pursue this Celtic thing with such a vengeance right now. Delving into the mysteries of La Triskèle for goodness sake! The girl will be seeing a Celtic spiral every time the cream swirls in her coffee! I’m sorry but the whole thing’s ridiculous! I think it’s just another one of her stories made from whole cloth. Oh but I hate it when I sound so mean.*
- You? I kind of like it when you’re not so nice. Makes me feel better about my own mean streak.
- *I’m holding back the last letter I wrote her. It just galls me to think of sending her another long, thoughtful letter without knowing if she’ll get it or even read it with any care.*
- *Mamma mia. Did you find out what part she got in that play?*
- *How can I find out when she doesn’t write or call? Maybe I have been scolding her too much in my other letters. Do you think I scold too much, Suzanne?*
- She may have been reading between the lines.

Silence

Know what I mean?

- *No. I don’t think I do.*
- I don’t know. Maybe she takes every observation you make as a reflection of some wrongdoing on her part—
—*instead of a reflection of my concern for her, is that it? My caring about her. Instead of my trying to get her to start making smart choices for herself... and for my grandson.*
- That’s exactly what I mean, Lizzie.
- *Oh gosh darn it to heck! I try not to nag her I do. I try to be generous and let her get this restless rambling thing out of her system for one last time.*
- But you speak the whole truth in your letters to her, don’t you? I mean about how you feel, about what you believe is best for her.
- *I am her mother.*

- Of course you are. So? Maybe your insights sting.
- *I don't know that they do. She may think of me as just another nag gone prematurely sour. Do you know what I mean? As if I were dead set against letting young people live their lives to the hilt. It's just that everything she writes about that Frenchman's musical theater is all so nebulous. Quoting chapter and verse from the gospel according to whatever his name is. Celtic folklore and Druid priests and all these terribly romantic locations. I don't know where it will end, Suze, I don't. I can't speak for any of her new-made friends back East, but I know that Josie does not appreciate Kaitlin's latest shenanigans.*
- Is that her bosom buddy?
- *Her oldest friend on earth. They've been palling around together since they were kids. Kaitlin virtually lived with the Wiltons when she was eleven and twelve. But Josie has her head on her shoulders. Her feet are planted on the ground. At least she had the good sense to marry the father of her child. Or the good fortune. Her Robert's a decent man, a good man, not like Kaitlin's Richard. More like your Mike.*
- They do seem to be rare birds. Men, I mean, who can hang in there.
- *I know for a fact Josie receives letters from Kaitlin but she's so loyal, why she'd never tell on her "sister" to me. Kids! I can't imagine she's very keen on all of Kaitlin's harps and moors and quails and dunes. That's all just received notions Kaitlin's parroting in her letters to me, maybe to herself too. But Josie must see through such infatuation or whatever it is. I'm afraid my daughter's inner compass has gone kerflooey again. I mean, how much of a dope can she be? My life looks like a masterpiece by comparison, even if it is dull and unimaginative.*
- How about when you were her age? Didn't you do anything peculiar or extreme?
- *When I was twenty-two, twenty-three...? I'd started a completely new life here in Cliffport.*
- Well?
- *But I had no other life left. I had found a new life here.*