

Sabine

Book One of the Sabine Series

By

Phyllis H. Moore

Reviews:

Like Kya in *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Sabine forges her way through family dysfunction, deprivation, and abuse, and we root for her indomitable resilience and resourceful spirit at every turn. Eloquently described, *Sabine* is more than the story of survival. It's about human connection and the power of love.

—Saralyn Richard, author of the Detective Parrott mystery series

Moving and often sublime, *Sabine* by Phyllis H. Moore follows a young girl from torment to triumph. Awakening the reader's every emotion, Moore's lyrical style and engaging characters will keep you turning pages to find out what happens next.

—Ginny Fite, award-winning author of *The Physics of Things*

Abandoned by her father and relegated to the care of a mentally unstable mother, Sabine encounters more trauma by the age of ten than most children, thankfully, will experience by adulthood.

Sabine's life has taught her resilience. In some ways she is as wise as a woman beyond her years, while in others, a confused and impressionable child looking for someone to love her, to show her she has value and worth.

This abused and neglected girl's coming of age story in the Texas countryside likely will break your heart.

—**Susan P. Baker**, Author of *Ledbetter Street, A Novel of Second Chances*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

DEDICATION

To

Richard S. Moore

Phillip J. Moore

Sarah M. Click

Walter J Click, Jr.

&

Senior

CHAPTER ONE

1977, Chambers County, Texas

Sabine

DALE DAWSON'S FILTHY hand, clamped over my mouth. His fat fingers pressed into my lips with grime, salt, and grit, so firm I couldn't move my jaw, only my tongue. His nickname was "Booger." The Dawsons lived west on the county road from the Dunn Ranch, where I lived. Dale was the closest thing to a playmate I had. My name is Sabine Nadine Cole. I was four and he was twelve.

The searchers, Dale's friends and his mother, Rita, called my name and wandered away from the Dawson house and into the woods. I squatted behind the bushes in the side yard. Streaks of dried tears formed tight lines through the dirt on my cheeks. My mother, Josephine, knew where I was. Sitting on the porch steps, smoking, she'd watched me leave the yard with Dale. I

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never could be sure what Josephine knew or didn't know, but when her eyes squinted and stared, she knew exactly what she was doing.

Why didn't she stop me? Did she care?

After Dale released my mouth, I ran my tongue over rough, cracked lips to the corners where a salty grit had formed. I listened, hiding from the older boys and Mrs. Dawson. I managed to swallow, my throat scratchy and dry. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a drink of water or heard my own voice.

The group searched, but if they found me, they'd ask questions, and no one would believe me. Josephine wouldn't either. That day, behind the privet was a kind of awakening for my young self. I was on my own.

I had Ms. Emily, our neighbor across the county road, but if I was completely honest with her, something would have to change and I was certain I'd be taken away. I had heard the stories and knew my siblings had been taken. Maybe they were with their fathers. That might have been okay, but I had no idea who my father was. No. I had to be the one in charge of what happened to me.

That night was beautiful. Darkness edged out the blue sky, to thin streaks of orange and pink on the horizon. The bright color spread in the sky, like the veins that splayed just under my

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tissue paper skin. The end of the day wasn't about me. It was too beautiful and peaceful to be about a dirty little girl. I could give up my worries to watch the changes in the sky. Sunset had always been my version of a parent tucking me in. I considered the pastures and woods the safety of the ranch, not the interior of the few rooms downstairs in the big house where I lived with Josephine.

Dale's friends shouted my name in the distance. Crickets and frogs chirped and croaked. Night creatures would come out soon, rested and ready. The cycle of activity ending the day would continue no matter what happened to me. The thought of the critters' nightly noises calmed me.

Mrs. Dawson's chickens and guineas hunkered, saying goodnight in their throats. Their silly noises usually made me smile—not now. I longed for a fixed roost, like them, a bed where life was predictable and safe—where those who hunted were fenced out by walls of wire. The birds squatted, comfortable in their coops, wiggling their chubby feathered bodies into sleep. I knew things, more things than what I could see in front of me, spirit things.

I wanted to erase the day. But if I did, the comfortable coop would be gone. I would be like Josephine, my mother, forgetting parts of her life, as she wandered, trying to find herself. Or,

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maybe Josephine tried to lose herself. I never did quite figure that out.

The shame, the naughtiness, was what I wanted to wipe away. Everything else, the boys, Mrs. Dawson, the night creatures, were tolerable. In fact, the night creatures were my spirit animals, the familiars every indigo child needs, a living thing, reminding me—sometimes I couldn't tell where I ended and the ranch began.

I waited until the voices quieted before I would go out into the dusk, hoping the approaching dark could hide me. I blamed Dale. It was his fault, but I was there, an unwilling silent body—my mind had wandered off, a place I'd created for such things. I wasn't really angry with Dale. My anger always roosted on Josephine. I wanted to sit on her with the claws and spike of a rooster, not a chicken. She never let me close enough.

Josephine had sent word by a passing kid on a bicycle for Mrs. Dawson to send me home. That's when they started the search. My first thought when I heard the kid was that Josephine had watched Dale lead me out of the yard and down the dirt road. Why didn't she call me back or call out to him?

I supposed Josephine couldn't make her mouth work. Vodka kept her from being able to talk sometimes. Josephine's face would look as if she wanted to say something, then her head would drop, and her eyes would close. Whatever she'd wanted

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to say was gone. I sometimes wondered if that might be the time Josephine would say something I wanted to know. I'd lean toward her and watch her eyes, waiting.

Now, Dale could move away from me. No one noticed, as he scurried out, sneaky like a mouse, and joined in the search, walking as if he'd noticed the others and wanted to be a part of finding me. I clucked my tongue and let out a sigh. No one could hear but him.

I needed someone on my side in order to tell what happened, and there was no one. I was alone and never could find the words to explain. Being alone forced me to figure things out, trust no one, even those who were supposed to take care of me. Yes, Ms. Emily would surely do her best, but Josephine could control people and always had. She'd learned from the best, her father, Daniel Dunn.

I was a strange little girl. No one ever said that to me, but that's the feeling I had, and I knew for certain that Josephine wasn't normal either. She'd allowed me to follow a boy who'd promised me a kitten. At the time the offer seemed okay. I blamed myself. Josephine and Marvin, her boyfriend, never had kept up with my whereabouts. I'd known their weaknesses when I left the yard. The problem seemed to be, even though I was an indigo child, the confusing abilities carried no warning about Josephine's neglect or the danger.

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Dale's dog, Remy, circled slowly around the bush where I hid. Remy, a cute, fuzzy, brown and white terrier, sniffed in my direction. He really was my only true friend. Rita Dawson and Dale fed Remy. He would show up at their house for an evening meal, but he spent most of the day and night with me on the Dunn ranch. I considered Remy my dog but knew Josephine would never buy food or welcome a pet. Dale never seemed to mind.

My connection with Remy was special. We could communicate. While some of the searchers were deciding to quit and go home, pedaling off on their bicycles, Remy sent me a message, *I won't give away your hiding place. Don't worry.*

I slumped against the lower branches of the overgrown, glossy privet, hoping Remy would catch the scent of another critter and move away. If I thought it, he usually reacted to the images of the words. I didn't have to speak aloud. However, Remy's head bowed. Maybe he was as ashamed and as helpless as me.

If I had been a dog or a cat, my life would have been perfect. They're born in a litter and everyone expects the mama to give them up. I had experience with unwanted litters, sometimes tragic. My mother (I never called her that) had no intention of taking care of children. I was the only one left at the Dunn place with Josephine. The others had died as infants or been sent off

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to other places. I never knew my siblings and felt no connection to them, but I did have some feelings for Josephine and ached to know my father.

CHAPTER TWO

Emily

EMILY RAILEY PACED on her front porch. She held her hand over her eyes, squinting toward the setting sun. Sabine hadn't appeared at Emily's back door in the heat of the afternoon as she usually did. Jason, the mail carrier and Emily's friend and former coworker, had waved when he'd stopped at Emily's mailbox earlier. When she approached he yelled, "Have you seen Sabine? Josephine's looking for her."

The question sent a chill down Emily's arms. Sabine had successfully navigated Josephine's neglect for almost five years. It wasn't unusual for the child to be out and about. The girl was bright and articulate, but odd. She had a way of slipping around and avoiding being cornered by adult questioning. Sabine being absent without permission wasn't a red flag. What worried Emily was that Josephine had noticed. The child must have been gone for a long while.

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Emily felt responsible, because Sabine was the granddaughter of Nadine Dunn, now deceased. Emily and Nadine had been friends in high school. She'd married Daniel Dunn when she was only seventeen and moved into the old family mansion on Dunn Ranch. Although the Dunn family was wealthy and the men were influential, Nadine's life hadn't been easy. The difficulty of living had been inherited by their only living daughter, Josephine. Emily was invested in making sure Sabine could survive the Dunn legacy.

On most days, Emily would get a visit from Sabine, a chance to help her wash her face and get a snack. The days she didn't appear, there was always a good reason, but today was different. Jason's question worried Emily. She needed to be careful about trying to help Sabine. The child's mother was needy also and could shut down, refusing Emily's assistance.

Josephine accused Emily of being a busy-body. Maybe she was when it came to Sabine and Josephine's other children for that matter. If she called Josephine, Emily ran the risk of being forbidden to see Sabine or have access to the Dunn house.

Emily Railey, a contemporary of Sabine's grandparents, had known the Dunn family since she was a child, in school with the Dunn boys, Daniel and Ethan. She couldn't point to any specific incidents, but she suspected there had been problems going back

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to great grandparents. Secrets came to mind when she thought of the Dunns. And, apparently Josephine intended to keep them.

Emily's intervention sometimes was the only reason Sabine was still with her mother. As the family's closest neighbor, Emily counted the days until Sabine could be in school and monitored by others. She walked a fine line, aware that Josephine was not an adequate care-taker, but also aware that Sabine was resourceful, smart, and would be devastated and imprisoned by the foster care system.

Watching Josephine grow up with a mother ravaged by cancer and an alcoholic father pained Emily. She'd tried to help, but Josephine had been a wild child since she was a preteen. And then, there was the deaths of Emily's only child, Matthew, in the Vietnam War and shortly before that her husband died in a tractor accident, pulling stumps while cleaning after a hurricane. Before Emily was forty-four, she'd lost her entire family.

Now, as a widow, retired from her employment with the post office, Emily was in a position to help Josephine and Sabine. However, she had to be clever about the assistance she offered. The Dunns had always been stubborn, in her opinion, but Josephine was the most willful and had been from a young age. She was also suspicious of others, almost paranoid.

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Josephine may be a lost cause, but Sabine has a chance, a slim chance, but a chance.

Sabine

Steps came closer as I sat straighter to peer through the thick leaves. A shadow of someone at the front gate fell on the ground. The hinges squeaked as it swung open. Mrs. Dawson entered the yard and stood under the security light as it flickered on. She swung the gate, but it didn't close, leaving an opening to the path. She stomped toward her house, scowling.

Two pink sponge rollers wobbled in the weathered brown hair on the top of Rita Dawson's head as she walked toward her front door. Her wrinkled, green plaid, house dress snapped up the front, a familiar pattern, something I'd seen in a dream followed by a whoosh and explosion. It had shaken me from sleep a couple times, causing me to sweat and shake.

"What are you doing in the front yard, Remy?" Mrs. Dawson threw her head back and placed her wrinkly hands on her hips. "Get on in the back so you can get your supper. That kid will turn up. Someone needs to take a switch to her and her mother."

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Before I could slip out of my hiding place, I had to wait until Mrs. Dawson was inside the house. The television had been on and a half bottle of beer sat on a TV tray beside her recliner.

Although I could understand Mrs. Dawson's dislike of Josephine, I was offended by the threat. Dale wouldn't call attention to my hiding. He ran the risk of me telling the truth. The irritated woman climbed the front steps and entered her house.

My legs cramped, covered with dirt. The walk, in flip-flops, to Dale's house earlier in the afternoon, had rubbed sores between my toes. The oozing circles caked with grit were ugly, but they didn't hurt. I spit on my finger and tried to clear some of the dirt but had difficulty making the spit. Stretching my legs to stand, I peered inside the Dawson's house. Mrs. Dawson was in her chair, facing the TV, her arms moving above her head, winding more pink rollers into her hair.

I picked up Dale's slingshot from below the privet. It's mine now, Booger. I approached the front gate and wedged myself through the opening. Leaving the gate ajar to avoid the squeak, I headed down the dirt road toward the lights of my house. The tall shadow the security light threw in front of me grew longer with each step, and then the road was the shadow.

Remy ran to catch up. Moon glow cast enough light for me to see the trail in front of us, the trodden path flatter than open

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field. The familiar odor of manure and a pasture of mown hay softened my fears.

Coyotes howled, and their pups yelped right along with them, the wails trailing along the creek. Remy trotted faster, toward the Dunn place.

Houses on the country road were separated by fields and pastures. Older kids rode their bicycles to visit friends. Sometimes they would congregate at the Dunn place driveway to tease Marvin, Josephine's boyfriend, until he'd run them off. The boys taunted that the house was haunted. Those boys had never been inside, so they didn't know the truth. I knew they were right.

I could understand why they might think the house was haunted because it was big, three stories, and neglected. Surrounded by tall live oaks, the big stone structure was hidden. Passersby could barely see the gables and turrets through the leaves of the trees and brush. The Dunn house was as strange and alone as me and Josephine, but sometimes that worked out just fine.

I picked up two rocks and held them in my hand. They were warm and smooth, a comfort, like most things I found outside. The slingshot hung heavy in my other hand. Dale had taken nothing from me, only played his stupid boy games and made me cry. I didn't consider it stealing to take the slingshot. He'd

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left it. I'd never shot such a bean-shooter, but if the coyotes came close, I'd try. I might only scare them because I couldn't think about hurting an animal.

"You're a good dog, Remy," I said in a cracking, weak voice. Remy looked up at me.

I wouldn't tell Josephine or Marvin what had happened. I was angry with Dale, but I didn't want him to suffer. I had a feeling he wasn't normal. Marvin might kill him. Whatever reaction Josephine and Marvin would have, would be a stomping, throwing, cursing reaction, and it might be directed toward me. I was already curling inside herself thinking about what could happen. Physical pain had never bothered me. In fact my inability to recognize it sometimes could have been dangerous.

Remy nudged the back of my leg with his wet nose, reminding me to stay in the present. He reached into my thoughts, "*We're going to your house, right? Let's keep moving.*" Remy must have been nervous about the coyotes, too. He could be grumpy sometimes, but he *was* the one in the most danger from them.

Humans sometimes took my calm for dullness, but I was and am smart—could read and tell time at a young age, smart enough to sit still and watch before I jumped into something where I had no business. That's why I felt stupid for believing

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Dale and following him. I felt bad, real bad, bad enough to learn my lesson. Sometimes I wanted something so much, I would choose to believe it existed and doubt my instincts. I promised myself that wouldn't happen again.

The walk was long, and my legs trembled. Sand caked my feet. My thongs rubbed between my toes again, grinding into the already sore spots. I barely trudged as I reached the lights.

Moving like the feral cats around the house to try to see inside, I watched the kitchen windows because they stood open, (the only windows that were ever opened).

The Dunn house was grand, but wasn't air conditioned. Josephine sat at the table with a glass and a bottle of vodka in front of her. The clutter was still there—dirty dishes, uneaten food, and unwashed glasses. My view, through the back screened door, was like watching someone else's life, but it was mine. Nothing had changed.

"It's not a man's job to clean house," Marvin often said.

Josephine would close her big green eyes, her lashes resting on her cheeks. I supposed my mother waited for the notion of someone cleaning the house to pass, so she could reopen her eyes and take another sip of vodka and a draw on her cigarette.

I stalked in the shadows outside until Marvin was visible, standing at the kitchen sink with his back to Josephine. I crouched until I was sure he couldn't see me. He stared beyond

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the pasture. He didn't move or see, but I bet he plotted. That's what Marvin did. If he was talking he was plotting. His mind always whirling, causing me to become dizzy when he was close. I strained against the chaos of his energy, a constant block to my abilities.

“What the fuck, Josephine? You don't have any idea where Sabine could be?” Marvin yelled, slamming his fist on the kitchen counter. “You're a sorry excuse for a mother. I can't even come here to a working toilet. Those welfare people will be out here nosing around again. I ought to call them myself. What the fuck have you been doing all day?” He slammed his palm on the counter again. He talked in paragraphs, taking no breaths. “You couldn't find the time in your busy schedule to call the plumber?”

Remy remained at the edge of the yard, behind the brush. I glanced at him. Sometimes he would take off running to the Dawsons' house when Marvin yelled.

Please don't call the sheriff, Marvin.

“You better hope she's here when I get back or I'm calling the sheriff, and that'll be one more kid Josephine Dunn lost to the State of fuckin' Texas.” Marvin walked across the kitchen floor in his polished boots (they were always polished), loud footfalls. He talked and mumbled the whole time he polished

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his boots. His whispering to himself and the smell of leather polish always happened together.

I hoped he wasn't going to hit Josephine. But my biggest worry was the threat of a call. I wouldn't miss Josephine, but the thought of being swallowed by the State of fuckin' Texas was scary and had been exactly what had happened to some of my siblings.

Relieved when he left out the back door, I didn't move until he started his truck and drove off. He often sped away, taking his anger down the road for a while, driving as fast as he talked.

Remy walked out of the woods, giving me a sideways glance then looked back in the direction of Marvin's truck, the taillights finally heading down the farm-to-market road. Marvin might have been singing at the top of his lungs, or cursing and mumbling about Josephine and me.

Remy and I circled the tractor shed and watched from the cistern beside the windmill. We could hide there. A grapevine draped over the cistern, created a leafy cave between the two, the perfect hiding spot to spy on the house and driveway. I could also watch the pasture and woods, observe the wildlife there—a serene, calm life compared to inside the house.

Two loose boards had enough room to wedge the handle of Dale's slingshot. It was a good slingshot, made of thick wood with a heavy black rubber sling, not a flimsy plastic model from

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a variety store. The soil in the vine cave was cool, loose, and smooth, not hard and cracked like the rest of the yard. I ran my fingers through the dirt, comparing the difference the protection made. Sometimes I found old marbles buried there and imagined my grandfather, “Old Dan,” and his brother kneeling beside me. Something told me they’d hidden there also.

I stared at the back door, waiting to see if Josephine would leave, as I tilled my fingers through the loose soil and let it fall to the ground. I had a notion the soil was the basis of life. The trees, dirt, and animals took me away from the unmoving air inside the house.

I could outwit my mother, even with the erratic behavior. Familiar with Josephine’s changing moods and the effects of alcohol, I could wait her out. Josephine drifted, misting around in her own fog, then WHAM, there she was, looming, taking up all the air in the room, demanding everyone’s devotion, the queen of the scene. I could predict her behavior most of the time, depending on the level of liquid in the bottle sitting in front of her on the table—as reliable as the mercury in the outside thermometer.

I hoped Marvin wasn’t my daddy, as Josephine claimed. He was always irritated and often complained that someone was out to get him. I sat in that vine-covered hide-away thinking about my so-called parents.

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Yesterday, I'd eavesdropped on a conversation from the back foyer: "Today, when I was turning onto the farm-to-market, that son-of-a-bitch that drives that silver truck, came up behind me like he owned the road," Marvin had said. "I slowed down and every time he tried to pull around me, I'd edge over in that left lane. When he finally passed me, I sped up and rode his ass all the way to the city limits." Marvin's words sped also, agitated, racing.

"It might've been your fault, Marvin, pulling out in front of him like that," Josephine had said in a groggy drawl.

"Me? Why do you always think it's me? He drives that new truck, like he thinks he's suuum buddy. Pisses me off." Marvin's quick sharp words were evidence of a pill I'd watched him take. His talkative bursts of energy followed the pill by about thirty minutes.

"Who is this you're talking about, anyway, *Marvin*?" Josephine's voice was in the whiny range of drunk. "Why would he want to piss *you* off?"

"It doesn't matter what his name is. I don't even know." Marvin had said, as the sound of the vodka bottle sliding between them over the metal top on the kitchen table and then clinking on the top of a glass, signaled the argument would become louder.

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“You don’t know him, but you know you don’t like him?” A waft of cigarette smoke followed the sound of Josephine’s silver lighter. Her voice now vibrated in a sluggish mumble.

I sat on the floor in the hall and imagined Josephine’s eyelids growing heavy as she mocked Marvin and turned her lighter between her thumb and index finger, something I’d watched her do many times, a click on the top of the table. It was my mother’s way of filling the silence while she measured her ability to speak.

“Why are you doing this, making fun of me when I’m talking about something serious?” Marvin’s voice had risen. “You always do this. Take a problem and turn it around, like it’s me that causes it. You have no loyalty, woman. That’s what’s wrong with you. You’ll stick up for a stranger you don’t even know driving a damn silver truck. That’s been your problem all along, no loyalty.” Marvin ranted as he paced and pounded his fist on the kitchen counter again.

That’s what I’d wanted to do, pound my fists.

Marvin worked himself into a big anger yesterday, and then he’d dressed in a pressed white western-yoked shirt, starched jeans, and *always* polished boots and stormed out of the house—going to that angry place, wherever it was.

Marvin took pride in his appearance, clean shaven, his black hair neatly combed and shiny with hair tonic. The hair color was

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the evidence for me that Marvin wasn't my father. My hair was strawberry blonde, the bridge of my nose dotted with freckles.

Josephine defended him often. "Sabine, you don't understand how lucky we are to have Marvin. He picks up a few groceries and always brings you a sucker. All the women at Buck's ooh and ah over him. Just be happy you have a male role model."

I'd already figured out neither Marvin nor Josephine were models. I compared them to Ms. Emily, our neighbor across the county road, a caring woman, who had little to say about Josephine or Marvin.

I eavesdropped enough to know that Marvin doubted he was my father. "She doesn't look nothin' like my other kids, Jojo," Marvin would say. "My other kids all have dark hair, like me and light brown eyes. I have strong genes. Everybody says so. My kids are good-looking." I didn't know if what Marvin said was true. His other kids lived with his wife in East Texas somewhere.

Marvin's questioning made sense; he and I had no similarities. I felt no connection to him. I'd heard Dale and his friends say that when a man and a woman are in the same bed, that's when the woman gets a baby. I'd watched the feral cats, screeching after dark. I'd seen Josephine, much quieter than the

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cats, in her bed sometimes with Marvin, maybe Wendell, and other times people I didn't know.

I kept quiet on the subject, because at the time the only other person I thought might possibly be my father was Wendell Weems. He sounded slightly smarter than Marvin when he spoke, but my asshole radar went off around Wendell. Yes, Marvin was an asshole, also, that was understood. Wendell had no excuse. He was the district attorney. "For Heaven's sake, Sabine, that's the only person you need on your side," Josephine claimed." And that turned out to be true.

Emily

Emily didn't want to make the call, but it was the only thing she could think to do. "Rita, I hate to call around supper time, but I was wondering if you by chance saw Sabine today?"

Emily breathed a sigh of relief when Rita Dawson said Sabine had been there earlier, and Dale mentioned he saw her walking toward the Dunn Ranch about sunset. "Someone needs to call CPS on them, Emily. Josephine never knows where that kid is. And, that man she has living down there drives down this road like a bat out of hell, talking to himself like he's crazy. You gonna make that call?"

"I keep my eye out, Rita. I just wanted to be sure Sabine was headed home. You have a good evening." Emily hung up before

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Rita could say anything else. Emily had faith that Sabine could get home in the dusk. The child always had, and the dog that followed her was a comfort. However, Rita was right. Josephine was in one of her bad spells. If Sabine didn't come for a visit tomorrow, Emily was going to have to go to the Dunn place and that could spark an explosion.

CHAPTER THREE

1999, Jefferson County, Texas

SABINE, DRAWN TO the edge of the veranda, stared at the raging creek below. Her sister's lodge of a ranch house sat on a bluff high above the rushing water. The sun warmed Sabine's shoulders, releasing the fragrance of starch from her khaki shirt. She twisted her mother's emerald ring on her finger with her thumb, a motion she repeated frequently. Being back in Texas brought memories.

The flowing creek would eventually reach the Sabine River, the river their mother, Josephine, had claimed had been the inspiration for her daughter's name. She'd always said June's name came to her when she was filling out the birth certificate and came to the date, June, 1960-something. Sabine doubted her mother's claim, because Josephine hadn't been *inspired* by anything. She'd always been wrapped in her own needs.

Sabine recalled peeing in a gulley, a short walk from the windmill at the Dunn house, before she'd headed to the back porch. It was the night she'd returned from the Dawsons' and

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Josephine and Marvin had been fighting. The faulty toilet had been the main argument between them before Sabine had left the yard earlier in the day. She'd been four, maybe five. She couldn't remember how old Dale had been, but he was old enough to know better. She didn't want to remember Dale that way.

She could see clearly the shards of glass and metal strewn over the dirt yard, glimmering in the moonlight as she stepped over debris on the way to the porch. Josephine had allowed her friends to discard old car batteries and scraps of metal behind the Dunn house. The drunks had shot at bottles from their perches on the back porch, leaving the yard, littered with broken glass. In hindsight, Sabine had been lucky she wasn't shot as she sat under the windmill, hidden by vines.

Sabine's homecoming that memorable night had been brittle. As an adult it appalled her, but at the time, she'd been more concerned about the moods of Josephine and Marvin. Evening dew had glistened on the weeds and debris. The indoor lights had cast a yellowish glow through the dull, grimy windows of the Dunn place. Like the cluttered kitchen, the rubbish in the yard had been a reminder of neglect and disrespect. Josephine had allowed the disregard, her creation. Sabine's earliest memories of recognizing that her mother was responsible for

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their lives had been that walk across the yard and back to the house.

Now, Sabine leaned against the railing around the terrace, facing the back of her sister, June's, house. The patio was designed to accommodate plantings of lush ferns and palmetto around the huge oaks.

June's husband, Dr. Eric Shelton, once lived in a self-sufficient rustic cabin on the site. He'd built it as a young bachelor, designing the footprint for expansion for when he married and had children. The Shelton family had owned the ranch for more than three generations. The landscape, just minutes from Beaumont, was the family's legacy, running as deep as the Dunns'.

Sabine scanned the rustic façade. Large picture windows faced the bluff and on to an undulating coastal plain, covered with pin oaks, live oaks, palmetto, and huisache. June had embraced the lifestyle, immediately falling in love with Eric and his extended family. However, she'd needed coaxing to relax into Eric's attention. Sabine, a young teen when the couple had met, had to play matchmaker for her sister. "If you don't marry Eric, June, I will," Sabine had teased.

The door swung open, and June exited carrying a tray with glasses of iced tea and a plate of cookies. Sabine sank into one

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of the cushioned chairs at the patio table, under the shade of the largest oak. “That looks refreshing. Did you make the cookies?”

“Yes, to keep Beth busy while the others napped. What were you looking at?” June said.

“The creek. There must have been rain upstream. It’s swollen and flowing.” Sabine took a cookie from the plate. “You’re a good mother, June, amazing, actually.” Sabine noticed the things June did with her children, things Josephine had never done. A glint of gold, an initial ring on June’s middle finger, the swirls of the J, shone on June’s hand. Sabine winced with recollection of seeing it on Josephine as she’d lifted a glass of vodka.

June blushed and shook her head at Sabine’s comment about June being a good mother. Both of them were skittish about the expectations of motherhood. They’d talked about the responsibility many times and how their own mother had failed.

“Yes, the creek was over its banks about a week ago—heavy rains. You didn’t hear that on the news in New York City? The kids want to go fishing, but I’m leery of them going down by themselves. Maybe when they’re a little older.”

Sabine wondered if June’s children could recognize the beauty of their view and absorb the experiences of living in the nature that surrounded them. She laughed. Surely June didn’t really think Texas weather made the news on the east coast. “I

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ran wild when I was their age. Josephine never knew where I was. I had a knife, a rusted hook, and a spool of old fishing line from the Dawsons' shed." She examined the scars on her hands as she twisted the emerald ring on her finger.

"You're not suggesting I model my mothering after Josephine?" June added sugar to her tea and stirred. "My oldest is still under the age of ten."

"Absolutely not." Sabine waved her hands in denial. "I value my nieces and nephew. I think I was three or four when I was running around on my own. But, it was a wonderful feeling of independence when I was outside in the pastures, away from the tobacco smoke, *ghosts*, and the grasp of Josephine's wayward friends." Sabine squinted, looking away, fighting the tears that threatened. "I think I'm stronger for the challenges." She lifted her chin.

Sabine envied June for two reasons: Her sister had escaped Josephine and her friends at an early age, and June looked like their mother, translucent green eyes, thick auburn hair, and an olive complexion.

"Clearly a mixed blessing," June said. "Your independence and freedom came with the specter of danger. I just remember being scared one of the babies would choke and die. If it wasn't for the school bus accident calling attention to Josephine's severe depression, I might have seen a death or two. Not even

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our guardian angel, Ms. Emily, could patch everyone up after that fiasco.”

“I bet she tried though, didn’t she?” Sabine sat forward, resting her cheek on her fist. The mention of Emily, their neighbor and Sabine’s surrogate mother, made her smile.

“Yes, she did. It was just a few days before Dad came and picked me up. I’m sure Emily called him. She’d probably noticed there was a level of torment in Josephine that Emily hadn’t witnessed before.”

Sabine leaned back in the chair with her tea. “Emily told me about that day, the day of the school bus accident, and how worried she’d been about you and our brother, Billy. She said Josephine called your father, William. Emily had been afraid one of the bodies on the road was you or Billy. Can you imagine?”

June shook her head. “No. I don’t want to. If it were my children, I don’t know what I’d do.” June clasped her delicate hands and held them to her lips. Thoughts of her own children must have touched a tender spot. Her mouth was full, like Josephine’s too and the hands refined. A petite frame allowed June to wear their mother’s clothes, shoes, and rings, another thing Sabine envied. Josephine had had a notable cache of designer clothing in her large walk-in closet, a place where

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Sabine would spend time as a child when left alone on stormy days.

Sabine didn't want her envy to turn to resentment. For years she didn't know who was responsible for her reddish-blond hair and golden skin, or towering stature. As a teen she'd discovered she'd inherited her physical appearance from her father, an idea of a man, someone she'd never met. She yearned to know about his mental health. Surely, by the age of twenty-six she'd have known if she was prone to bouts of depression and mania. However, that had been a droplet in the sea of Josephine's frailties.

"Those kids were at the Dunn house after the accident." Sabine said, looking past the railing toward the tree line. June probably didn't realize the victims of the fatal school bus accident took up residence in the upper floors of the Dunn house.

June's brow furrowed. She was still dressed in the soft pink blouse and floral jeans she'd worn to teach her child development class at Lamar University. Sabine was certain she'd worn the blue jacket during class, the one she had slung over her arm when she'd arrived home.

"I don't remember that." June's eyes narrowed. "I thought the deputies took us all home a few at a time. I recall standing in the rain." June shook her head. "You weren't even born yet. How could you remember that accident?"

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Sabine frequently revealed details about the Dunn Ranch that June questioned. “I don’t remember. I’m not talking about the children who lived. I’m talking about the ones who died. They were upstairs at the Dunn place. I used to play with them the few times they’d come downstairs. They were afraid of Josephine.”

“Oh, here you go again. I ignored you the first time you said *ghosts*. You and your spirits and seeing phantoms. You’re an adult now, Sabine. Don’t you think it’s about time you stop talking nonsense.”

“You still don’t believe me.” Sabine shrugged. She didn’t expect June to change her opinion about the Dunn place being haunted. Sabine didn’t need June’s validation. Plenty of others had accepted that Sabine had been, and still was, able to communicate with spirits. She had never enjoyed being “weird,” as Josephine had called her. Sabine had struggled with being different most of her life. But, her eccentricity might have been what allowed her to survive, alone in the house with their mother. And, as it turned out, Sabine wasn’t the most derelict of Josephine’s children. Those early years of being Josephine’s only responsibility, born after all the other kids were out of the house, relieved Sabine of the worry about the babies dying.

Chills prickled down Sabine’s arms. The memory of her childhood on the Dunn ranch reminded her of how dangerous it

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had been. At the time, danger hadn't crossed her mind, as insignificant as the tangles in her long unwashed hair, the sunburn on the bridge of her nose, or the dirt-caked cuts on her legs and feet. The looming fear was that Josephine would die, unable to wake from an alcoholic black-out, and Sabine would be scooped up by some authority and taken away from the ranch, her only comfort. The wide open spaces would have been the loss.

A bird landed on the table, drawing Sabine out of the daydream. "I remember the day I met you, June, at Ms. Emily's, and she introduced you to me as my sister," Sabine said. "I didn't believe her. In my mind you were supposed to be a little girl, like the photographs in the box in Josephine's room. But you were in college, looked exactly like our mother, and I was maybe twelve. I stared at your face, and I saw the beauty and kindness Josephine could have had."

June chuckled and took a swig of tea. "Yeah, I thought I was grown. But I remember I was scared to death to be an adult. My biggest fear was that I'd grow up to be my mother. I didn't think I'd ever marry or have children."

"I remember." Sabine nodded. "You're living proof that premarital counseling and drug rehabilitation work, and it's possible to overcome a traumatic childhood. You've done

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everything right. The only regret I have about your choices is that you married my first crush.”

“And what about you, little sister? Have you resolved to be single and childless because of your traumatic childhood? Do you intend to hide yourself among the skyscrapers of New York City or in the subway tunnels?”

“Why do you insist on making my life sound so ominous? Sometimes your rude remarks remind me of Josephine.” Sabine’s voice rose in irritation. “You don’t hesitate to come to the city and use my apartment as your base of operation for an adventure. I resent your insinuations that I’m hiding there. I’m doing no such thing. I’m living and doing everything I’ve always wanted to do.”

June heaved a sigh. “Yes, I know you are, and you’re obviously still surly. Maybe I’m a little jealous. So, tell me about your reason for this unexpected return. Have you decided to do something with the Dunn Ranch?”

Sabine exhaled and looked into the oak canopy. “These trees call me back. You, Eric, and the kids...” She puffed her cheeks and let the escaping air flutter her lips. “I have a foot in both worlds and feel pulled to make a decision.

“Josephine’s attorney, my inherited attorney, has retired and his law practice belongs to his son. I like him, the son. He’s young and has fresh ideas. He knows my quandary and

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understands why I'm connected to the land. He contacted me about a group of women, investors in Houston, interested in the Dunn Ranch. They would market it as a retreat. He says the house, stables, creek, and proximity to the beach and Houston are the perfect atmosphere they're seeking. They're even excited about the prospect that Dale and Daisy could be caretakers." Sabine shrugged. "I don't know. I change my mind every thirty minutes."

The door flew open, and June's children came flying onto the deck and swarmed Sabine. She giggled, throwing her head back to allow them to cover her in kisses. "These are *my* children. Tell me where the fishing poles are. *I* will be their mentor of the worm."

CHAPTER FOUR

1977, Chambers County, Texas

Sabine

I PULLED THE creaking screened door open, peeking inside, before stepping over the threshold. No doubt Josephine would be angry, especially since she'd called attention to my being gone, by asking someone to look for me.

The house reflected Josephine, a mess. The atmosphere hung, stagnant, almost lifeless with little air. Dark rooms felt closed and musty. Decades of crazy created personalities and voices haunting the living, reminding me there had been others, many of them as slipshod as Josephine. I didn't want to know the secrets, too many and belonging to too many. I just wanted to know what was up with Josephine.

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The only person I'd really wanted to know had never lived on the Dunn Ranch, not while he was alive anyway. I stared at the ceiling in the back foyer, wondering if he could see me. I absorbed his energy, a thing without opinion or judgment, a flexible, wispy something like a firefly. I dreamed he could see me and was the mystery spirit who taught me to read and tell time. He watched me from the edge, the invisible limit, keeping me from knowing his name or face. However, the boundary changed, because he followed me away from the house, always there.

Josephine lifted her head, looking toward the back door, her eyes unfocused. Shiny, auburn hair hung in front of her face in big loose waves. Her slender hand eased the strands to the side with a slow and deliberate, but over-thought, sweep—a vodka dance she often performed. Josephine's hands were smooth and creamy, not wrinkly like Rita Dawson's.

Perfectly shaped brows arched over Josephine's once sparkly green eyes, rimmed with dark lashes. Some people called her a natural beauty. I agree Josephine was the prettiest mother in the world. That pretty got her in a lot of trouble. Josephine always said, "Pretty is as pretty does," ironic because Josephine doesn't do pretty. She was young compared to other kids' parents, like Rita Dawson. Josephine hid during the day

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behind closed draperies, drawn shut to shield her from the sunlight.

I made up fairy tale stories about my mother. Josephine buried secrets. If they were exposed, a curse would be released, the house would fall into a huge sinkhole, leaving the weeds and rusted debris clinging to the edges of the cavity. That was what I thought would occur if Josephine ever told the truth about herself. My mother had seen something, a vision so disturbing she couldn't risk the sight again. I accepted that was the truth of the mystery. Vodka softened the edges of the vision and Josephine could skirt around it without getting pricked.

I didn't recite the tales I made up. I didn't have the words when I was so young, but I'd gather old crayons and pencils, scraps of paper, and old tablets to draw pictures. The drawings were scattered over the downstairs of the Dunn place. Josephine sometimes stooped to pick them up, examine them, and say, "Sabine, you're disturbed."

The day I went to Dale's to see the kittens, Josephine mumbled, "Where the fuck have you been? Your daddy's going to whip your ass when he gets back." I cringed at the word *daddy*. Marvin had no claim to the title, and I resented the lie. I could tolerate her cussing just fine, but not the word daddy.

Josephine leaned on the table with her elbows, holding her wobbling head with her hands, as if she had difficulty holding it

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up. She used her slight hands, nails freshly painted coral, to assist her neck. They, too, had difficulty with the weight of her head, as if her hair had grown too heavy for her to sit upright.

“You’re filthy—Go on in there—in bed—don’t—I call you.” Josephine squinted at me, her eyelids weighted by the same invisible force.

I *was* filthy, I was always filthy. Josephine couldn’t actually see how dirty I was. Nor did my mother know I had the dirt of a naughty girl.

I said, “Yes ma’am,” because to do anything else would have been the kiss of death—not really, Josephine maybe couldn’t even stand.

A long gash caked with blood and dirt coursed down my calf. I felt the sting, but couldn’t remember how it had happened. The blisters between my toes were open, bleeding and aggravated by the sand grinding into them. Standing in front of Josephine, as she examined my dirty presence, reminded me of the cuts and scrapes. Until then I’d focused on my feelings and thoughts. I considered calling Josephine’s attention to the injuries, but decided against it. Josephine might tell me that’s what happened when I didn’t mind, and to “put some cream on it.” That was her remedy for every problem.

On one occasion, Josephine had poured vodka on a tissue and had held it on my open wound while I screamed. I closed

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my eyes at the thought Josephine might want to do that to the bleeding blisters between my toes. I didn't mention them.

Josephine's drunken stupor wouldn't let her think about punishment. That was the good thing about living at the Dunn place. It was always a new day when the vodka bottle was empty and everyone could sleep a while. "You want a pillow, Josephine? You look tired."

"Don't be silly." Josephine had dressed and put on makeup, possibly in preparation for someone bringing me home, or worse, my mother planned to go out and party. She wore freshly pressed jeans (probably just out of the cleaner's bag) and a sleeveless T-shirt with a deep V-neck. Her orange leather sandals matched the stripe in the top. Large, gold loop earrings hung from her ears, and an "add-a-pearl" necklace lay on her collar bone. Her toenails matched the coral on her manicured fingers. She wore a wide, gold cuff bracelet, pushed up almost to her elbow.

It was unusual to see Josephine in clothes. Most of the time she wore a long, silk, flowered robe over her lace underwear. She had several robes. Josephine called them *kimonos*. If she was wearing one, the others lay in a heap on the floor in her room. Her eyes closed again, and her head dropped.

I left the kitchen and shimmied up on the vanity in our shared bathroom, my feet in the sink. I perched there opening

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bottles and jars, looking for the mystery cream Josephine talked about. I couldn't find it.

Without a room of my own, I considered a bed, of sorts, mine. It was an old crib mattress and a worn blanket—musty and damp, but I never knew anything different. There was little distinction between the coastal air and the humidity in the walled porch. I seldom put myself to bed there unless Josephine's room was empty of guests. I'd regretted the few times I'd gone to bed before the party was over.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sabine

MARVIN MIGHT HAVE turned the water on to the house, probably because he wanted to shave and comb his hair. I stood in the white-tiled bathroom unable to picture Josephine making the effort to find the valves. All of Marvin's things were gone from the vanity: his razor, comb and cologne.

I stood in the bathtub. The toilet hadn't been flushed and reeked of urine and whatever else was there. I peed over the drain in the tub and then squatted, splashing the running water over my legs and stomach. I rubbed over the scratch on my calf trying to loosen the dried blood. I used the corner of a dirty towel draped across the goose-neck faucet and then went to my mattress after putting on my dirty panties and T-shirt.

The tightness I felt on my cheek reminded me I'd forgotten to wash my face. Tomorrow. If I got up again, Josephine might decide to stand from the table, and then what would she do? I hadn't even closed my eyes when the back door slammed. I

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threw the musty covers over and rolled off the mattress and stared down the back drive. Stepping onto the screened kitchen porch, a shiver shook my damp body as my mother drove away. It didn't seem possible that Josephine could drive. Minutes ago she was holding up her head with her hands.

The worst part of seeing my mother leave, was knowing she'd come back in worse shape than when she'd left. Or, maybe she wouldn't come back at all.

I crossed the porch as Remy skulked from behind the cistern. Kneeling, I rubbed his head and buried my cheek in soft fur. We walked back to the cistern and sat. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the cool concrete shell. A chorus of frogs and crickets filled the air. In the distance fireflies flickered. Remy raised his nose and moved it through the air following a scent. I did the same and giggled. "It's mountain laurel, Remy. Smells like grapes. You remember."

A gigantic mountain laurel stood beside the dirt road to the creek. It was some distance away, but the breeze carried the strong scent. I caressed Remy. "We'll walk down there tomorrow. Maybe there'll be some blooms low enough to cut."

Ms. Emily had explored the road to the creek with me a few days before when Josephine and Marvin were gone. She'd pointed out sparse blossoms beginning to open. She'd taken a pair of clippers from the pocket of her apron and cut a half-open

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blossom from a low branch and had handed it to me. “Smells just like grapes,” Emily had said. “Those hard red things on the ground are seeds. We can take some and see if we can start some trees. I’ve always wanted one in my yard.”

Emily had helped me gather seeds and she put them in her pocket to save until I would visit her and help her plant them. Ms. Emily always had an idea for a project for us to work on together. I smiled at the memory of gathering the seeds and got up from the cistern and ran my hand across the front of my shorts. I still had a few mountain laurel seeds in my pockets also.

With my hands stuffed in my pockets, I walked toward the back porch, held the screen door open, and followed Remy into the back hall. We entered the kitchen to get water.

I hung over the edge of the wide sink filled with unwashed dishes. I had to jump and hold my arms rigid to balance on my stomach as my legs dangled. One hand grasped the faucet handle, the other captured handfuls of water.

The rotted smell of old food and mold entered my nose as the cool water reached my mouth. A raw pinch stung my throat after the first drink slid over my tongue. I held my hand under the water and wiped it across my face. The salty, wet grit that resulted loosened the tightened skin around my lips and eyes.

I filled a shallow bowl from the sink for Remy. I wriggled down from the counter, sloshing the water as I balanced the

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wide bowl and set it on the floor. Remy lapped a couple of times and then rolled his eyes.

I'd tried to wash the dishes once when Josephine was gone, but there was no soap. The encrusted food was impossible to detach with only water, and my precarious perch on the side of the sink was difficult to maintain. I ended up saying "screw it," or something like that and jumped off the counter

Something bad had happened earlier at Dales, but there was no one home to tell, except the ghost of my grandmother, Nadine. Remy already knew all about it.

My balance on the sink, a daily habit, took almost no effort. I peered out the window longing to see something in the driveway. I didn't know what I wanted to see. Maybe I'll know it when it happens.

I splashed more water into my mouth and over my face in an attempt to wash the day away. It was hard to believe it was not yet midnight, still the same day Marvin had driven away, and I'd followed Dale to see kittens. I preferred to think about Marvin leaving, and not the memory of being tricked by Dale. Josephine might never ask, but Emily could see right through my eyes and always questioned the trails of tears, marks, and dirt.

Being alone in the house was usual. I was annoyed that Marvin and Josephine could leave me by myself again.

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However, having them there wouldn't have been much better than them being gone.

Besides, the house was almost a living thing. It had a soul, but not always a good one. I tilted my head to the ceiling sometimes listening to the ragged pulse. The beat wasn't strong and thick, like the rhythm in my own neck when I held my hands there. The strum of the house was patchy, broken like thunder, rumbling with memories and secrets. Josephine kept the rooms dark, almost as if she were trying to strangle the life out of the place.

She might have had intuition if her mind wasn't fuzzy with alcohol. However, my mother's ability to think or take care of things wasn't that much better when she was sober.

The clock on the stove said 10:35 p.m. I could tell time. I could read when I was three years old. Ms. Emily said I was a child genius. But there was a voice helping me. It was an encouraging voice—not a man or woman—just there—like part of my own voice.

I opened the oven door where little boxes of cereal stood on wire racks. Ms. Emily often gave me a box to take home after my visits across the road. I hid the cereal from Josephine's visitors who smoked marijuana and got what they called the *munchies*. They would giggle and open cabinets around the kitchen looking for something to eat. I could've told them,

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unless it was huge bottles of Mexican vanilla, that Wendall Weems brought from the border, or old take-out, there was no edible food in Josephine's kitchen. The oven was a great hiding place because no one ever used it.

I chose from the boxes stacked on the oven rack. I pressed the perforated cardboard and tore the white paper bag to reveal the cereal. Munching on warm, chewy, sugar-coated flakes, I wandered to the front of the house to see if Marvin had parked there and slipped in the main door—no Marvin. Why do I look for him?

A baby grand piano was the only thing in the large living room. I was probably one of the few people who had ever heard Josephine play. My mother played by ear, with no music in front of her, able to play anything she'd ever heard.

I paced the big room, remembering listening to my mother on the piano. Josephine's slender hands with long fingers and painted nails could reach more than a full octave. I knew the keys that made an octave. Ms. Emily had shown me once on that very piano.

I liked to sit on the floor and watch Josephine's hands crawling across the keys like creamy graceful crabs running sideways on the sand to the ocean. I'd seen those crabs on rare occasions when Marvin and Josephine would allow me to go with them on visits to the Bolivar beaches. I couldn't take my

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eyes off my mother's hands. It didn't seem possible Josephine's fingers could move so fast and land on the right keys while her mind was so slow and foggy. Ms. Emily could only play Chopsticks with two thick fingers.

Josephine's fingers flew across the keys to sweet chords as she threw her head back and closed her eyes. Her bare legs stretched, extended bare feet depressing the brass pedals. The silky, floral robe, draped to each side of her on the piano bench, would slide off Josephine's willowy legs. For me, the sight was as honeyed as the sound of the music. Josephine stunned me sometimes.

My mother sang in a beautiful, clear voice and knew the words to all the Beatles songs and lots of other old songs. She played many classical pieces, waking me in the night. I could spend hours listening to Josephine play.

The recitals never happened when Marvin was home; the mood was bent by his being there. Josephine didn't express herself around Marvin. She shut down, folded inward. She went in her room, maybe thinking he couldn't see her, and she wouldn't see him. But, Josephine couldn't see me either.

The big empty room in the front of the house with the piano, was off the wide front foyer, where a curving staircase spanned to the second floor. A card table with two chairs sat in the foyer. Most of the time, the table had old mail and flyers littered over

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the top. Empty envelopes would fall on the floor and stay there until I picked them up, using them for drawing and then leaving them.

Floor to ceiling windows, across the front of the house, faced the deep entry porch. The windows, covered with old, light gold draperies, tattered in spots, would have allowed natural light if Josephine would have pushed the draperies to the ends of the bulky brass rods. The fabric collected dust that would fly when I would grab a corner and shake.

On the wall opposite the main hall, a large deep fireplace sat surrounded by bookcases. Some of Grandma Nadine's glass collection and books were still on the shelves. Nadine had collected Vaseline opalescent carnival glass. There were vases, bowls, goblets with pitchers, and little figurines. My favorite was a little terrier dog. It looked a little like Remy. There were stacks and stacks of *National Geographic* magazines.

Wooden Venetian blinds covered the small windows above the bookcases. I would sit on the dusty oak floor and watch shadows of leaves and lines, thrown there by the sun through the blinds. The shadow lines looked like the staves on the sheet music stored in the piano bench. The shadow leaf notes, stirred by the breezes outside, jumped around and over the staves. Sometimes, if there was a strong wind, the shadows would appear to be liquid, swirling on the floor.

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If Josephine played the piano at the right time of day, I would imagine the leaves dancing between the lines of the bass and treble clefs to the music my mother created. Josephine, lost in the music, wouldn't notice I was in the room.

I sat on the living room floor with Remy, moonlight filtering in through the small windows. I crumpled the empty cereal box in my hand and walked across the hall to Marvin's room, a clean room he took care of himself. I left the crumpled box on his night stand, hoping it would attract a mouse. "The mouse will poop in his bed, Remy." I giggled at the thought.

Cars slowed at the road, and I hurried to the foyer to look through the beveled glass doors. Several sets of car lights shone through the wooded frontage between the house and road. I ran through the foyer and back hall to the kitchen and jumped in front of the sink, holding my body up with rigid arms to look out the window. The cars had turned off the road and pulled down the back drive.

Josephine had parked and struggled to get out of her car, brown paper bags under her arms. Her laughter carried on the wind as she talked to someone also struggling to exit the passenger seat. No, this isn't what I wanted to see.

The other cars, familiar, pulled in behind Josephine. She would often meet people at the liquor store or bar and invite them home with her.

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I didn't want them to see me. They staggered up the drive. My heart raced, and a queasy nausea bubbled in my stomach. Wanting to get away from the partiers, I gave Remy the signal and he followed me to the living room, where I wrestled with the big paneled pocket doors that slid into the wall between the living room and front foyer. I couldn't make the doors budge. "Fuck." As the partiers approached the back of the house, I considered leaving through the front door, but Josephine kept it locked and stored the key in her nightstand.

In a panic, Remy and I ran through the living room and the wide opening to the dining room and entered the butler's pantry. The long rectangular room had two swinging doors, one into the dining room and the other into the kitchen. The doors were about eight feet apart with bolt locks on the tops which kept them from swinging back and forth. I stood on a step stool stored in the little room. My fingers barely reached the knob on the bolt. "Shit," I whispered as I stretched to coax it up and then slid it to the door frame where it met the loop of metal that would surround it and hold it secure. I fumbled with the stool, stepping around Remy to place it at the kitchen door and repeat the process to lock our hiding place. Soon there were garbled voices and laughter in the kitchen.

My hands on my hips, I scanned the room, admiring the cozy space. Why hadn't I thought of it before? "We'll sleep here

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tonight, Remy,” I said in our silent language. Remy rolled his eyes.

“Dogs like small spaces, Sabine,” Remy said. “You should have a bed with a pillow and some cover.”

I agreed, I needed to create a spot to sleep. What would Ms. Emily do? The black and white linoleum was cool and dusty, littered with mouse droppings and dead bugs. The dingy yellowed cabinetry around the room was stacked with items: a large package of unopened paper towels, bags of batteries, empty cans of bug spray, economy-sized boxes of mouse traps, a dead plant shriveled into the dried potting soil in a plastic pot, and other random items Josephine and Marvin had tossed into the room.

I grabbed the broom, resting against the wall, and swept bug carcasses away to clear a spot. I pulled the package of paper towels to the floor to use as a pillow and removed table cloths from one of the deep drawers to spread over the floor as cover. A musty odor followed the cloths, and the fabric was scratchy, forever creased from old starch.

I smiled. “This is it, Remy. Our bed, our club house, all ours.” Remy curled up beside me, snuggling his head into my side with his nose just under my ribs. I rolled to my side and stretched my arms around Remy’s neck. “This is our secret place. You’re my number one dog and best friend.”

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Remy closed his eyes. I heard his prayers for me, an aching for me to be safe. “I’ll be fine, Remy. I’ll be fine. I promise.” We slept for some time and then, after the laughter and talking in the kitchen stopped, I climbed the stool to unlatch the bolt, opened the door, and peeked into the kitchen. It was 3:45 a.m., according to the clock on the stove.

I balanced on the sink for more handfuls of water, looking out the window to see the cars still in the driveway. The party had moved to Josephine’s bedroom. That was normal.

Returning to the butler’s pantry with Remy, I struggled to relock the door. The pallet was almost as comfortable as my normal sleeping place and probably cleaner.

CHAPTER SIX
JEFFERSON COUNTY, 1999

SABINE LOUNGED ON a fallen tree next to the creek as her niece put a worm on the hook of her little brother's fishing line. The kids stood on the edge of the flowing creek, giggling and squirming at the touch of the slimy worms. Sabine was impressed with her niece. June had offered to grill steaks if Sabine would spend the night and wait to leave until the following morning.

June frequently forgot Sabine was vegetarian, but the dinner invitation was easy to accept, because Sabine enjoyed being around her nieces and nephew. The kids reminded her of the best parts of her own childhood. She also wanted to see Eric. Of all the people Sabine valued from her past, June's husband, Eric, a veterinarian, understood her ability to communicate with animals.

In fact, when June and Eric were dating and even after they married, he would ask her to commune with his horses. He appreciated her insight and always had. Eric's intuitions were

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much like hers, but he'd flattened his response to his perceptions, and Sabine didn't blame him. Unlike her, Eric preferred smooth, easy encounters in his historically conservative family. She, on the other hand, didn't mind a confrontation. Many times, she enjoyed it.

Sabine telephoned Daisy, Dale's wife, to let her know she wouldn't be arriving at the Dunn Ranch until the following morning. "I stopped at June's and she's convinced me to stay overnight."

"Aw, a slumber party with your sister, that's nice, Sabine. Just as well, Dale's sitting with a cow that's calving. She's not a heifer, and she's had a difficult birth before. I just came from the house. It's ready for you, no problem, but we've been out all afternoon. I was afraid I might have missed your call. We'll look forward to you getting here tomorrow. Stop by our house for lunch."

As she told Daisy goodbye the kids bounced up and down squealing. "Okay, great. I'll see you then."

The youngest pulled a wiggling fish out of the water. Sabine snapped a photo with her phone. Beth wrestled the catch, unhooking it and throwing it back into the creek.

After fishing a while, the kids set their poles to the side and made mud pies from squishy black mud in a nearby puddle. Beth was the main chef, giving orders for decorating their

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creations with pebbles and leaves. Sabine scrolled back through the photos of the kids. There were orbs around them, a host of Dunns and Sheltons she suspected.

Sabine had flashbacks of her vine-covered hiding place between the windmill and cistern at Dunn House. A couple of feral cats and Remy were her assistants with mud pies. She imagined the soil and mud between her fingers, certain that her negative emotions had often been tilled into the ground, escaping through her worried hands and tears. Would her life have been different if June and Billy had been there with her when she was such a little girl? Did siblings help to dissipate the whirl of residual trauma? At the time, she'd thought everything was okay.

The night Marvin had left was one of the times it would have been comforting to have someone else at home. She'd had a premonition about Marvin as she waited on her soiled mattress for Josephine to go to bed. It was a jumbled vision, but Josephine's shotgun had been there. Instead of going to bed, Josephine had picked up her purse, walked out the back door, and driven off.

Memories of Josephine and that night bubbled up at the strangest times. Now, as she dined on the patio with the Shelton family, Eric told the children about a small white dog he'd

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treated with a large thorn in her paw. The kids' eyes were glued on their father.

June said, "We have company, Dr. Shelton. Most people don't want to hear about thorns or cattle palpation while they're eating."

Sabine smirked. "Oh, please. I'm family. Eric knows very well the meals I've endured when I was a child."

June gave a slight shake of her head and cut her eyes to the kids. Sabine had forgotten her nieces and nephew had no frame of reference for her childhood experiences, especially the way she'd found food. Sometimes she had to be reminded. "Oh, sorry, June. Yes, of course, you're right dinner etiquette is important." She rolled her eyes. Palpating a cow was a far cry from a thorn in a little dog's paw.

Eric's eyes melted Sabine with his sympathetic glance. He hadn't met Sabine until Josephine was gone. Now, no one was left to remember those days except Sabine. "Family dinners are nice. You guys are lucky," she said, looking to the kids. "Both your parents make it a point to eat with you each night. I hear that's a rarity now days."

"How come you're not eating any meat, Aunt Sabine?" Beth said.

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“It’s a choice I made to eat more vegetables and things that grow in the ground. When you’re older, like me, you have more choices. I can make a meal of a baked potato and salad.”

“Huh. Don’t you like meat?” Beth continued to question.

“I don’t dislike it. When you’re a little older I’ll explain myself.” Sabine didn’t want to insult the Shelton’s way of life. They relied on cattle and horses for income, but she worked against damage to the atmosphere from pollution, and agriculture was a major concern. Methane gas from the flatulence of livestock was one of the top five air pollutants. Her role as an attorney for a major foundation, established to tackle the pollution problem, encouraged her to walk her talk. Her role also caused the oil company leasing her land headaches. Their lease agreements and specifications were twice as long as normal.

June raised her eyebrow at Beth. “Don’t be rude, Beth. Sabine’s answered your question.”

Sabine winked at her niece. “You always have a right to ask me a question. I don’t think you’re rude. I love you, all of you, even my bossy sister.”

June frowned. “You think I’m bossy?”

“No. That’s a sister joke.” Often June would overreact to Sabine’s sarcasm. June was white-knuckled in her attempt to be the perfect mom and ridden with guilt about Sabine’s childhood.

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Sabine became weary explaining her quips, but she couldn't stop herself. She'd prefer it if June could just relax.

Eric cleared his throat. "Okay clean your plates, so you can have dessert."

After the kids had been put to bed, insisting that Sabine read a bed-time story, the adults sat on the terrace with glasses of wine. Concho, Eric's golden lab, was curled at his feet, content to relax at the end of the day. Three cats, mousers from the barn, strutted and lounged at the edge of the terrace. The waning Gibbous moon was just showing above the tree line.

"So, what's going on between you two? I've never seen you this testy with each other." Eric rubbed his boot across Concho's rump, ruffling his hair.

June glanced at Sabine and shrugged with a smirk of a smile. "I think I irritated Sabine because I question her seeing ghosts."

Sabine laughed. "That's just your most recent irritation. Really, June you need to ignore my sarcasm, it just spills out."

Eric grinned. "You know I appreciate your extra senses, Sabine. Have you found a new ghost following you?"

"They all do, whispering in my ears, all the time, especially lately."

Eric cocked his head. "Why's that?"

Sabine sighed and set her wine glass on a side table. "I need to do something with the ranch. It's the taxes, since there's no

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grazing going on, but I also don't get down here to spend as much time as I thought I would." She ran her hands through her long hair and pulled it over one shoulder. "I've made like-minded friends in New York. I enjoy travelling. I think the ancestors are worried. So, they're in my ear."

"I can understand the dilemma," Eric said, leaning over to scratch Concho's ears. "Maintaining land is a big responsibility. You're working on the ecology thing from a much bigger platform now. Is that still your life's dream?"

"Absolutely. I have the job of a lifetime. I've met people I would never have encountered." Sabine smiled. "As you know, I've never had much respect for the family that came before us. They're aware. My attorney has a group of investors who are interested in the Dunn Ranch. They want to come see the property and meet me." She shrugged and sat forward. "So far, it sounds like just the group that I'd be comfortable with, excellent stewards willing to alter the Dunn legacy, inject positive vibes."

Eric looked to June. "You're not questioning that Sabine has the right to this decision are you."

"No. Not at all. You know I've never wanted anything to do with that ranch. Bad memories there for both of us."

Sabine nodded. "For me, all the bad memories were in the house, like it was a personality. However, houses don't die. The

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ranch was my salvation, the animals, the creek, the pastures, all that was my solace. I guess it's a bittersweet feeling."

Eric drained his glass of wine. "Well, it's past my bedtime, and I have an early day tomorrow. If there's one thing I know for sure, you two are of the generation of Dunn women who have the power to change the world. I'm proud to be in your family."

Sabine raised her glass. "Thank you, Dr. Shelton and good night." Sabine smiled at June after Eric entered the house. "You know I was smarter than you when I was twelve. I saw him coming a mile away and that always got your goat."

June shook her head. "I don't know why you have to rub my nose in you being right. I married him and had his children, didn't I? I'm very happy."

"I know, and I told you so when I was twelve.

CHAPTER SEVEN
1977, CHAMBERS COUNTY, TEXAS

Sabine

THE MORNING AFTER Marvin left, I pulled the slingshot out, a pile of pebbles at my side as I propped myself against the cistern. Alternating my pulling arm, I practiced shooting at a distant fence post, one eye closed aiming at a target. The rocks I hurled didn't reach the post, but they got closer.

Remy roamed in a nearby field, sniffing the ground. The back door slammed, and voices carried. Cars started, and gravel crunched under the tires on the driveway until all the cars were gone except Josephine's Cadillac.

Barefoot, I stepped over pieces of glass and rusted metal towards the back porch, expecting Josephine to be the sole survivor of her party. I tip-toed down the hall and stopped at Josephine's door. Her dark hair flowed over the pillow.

The toilet flushed. My heart quickened and a rash of heat spread across my shoulders. A man, I hadn't ever seen before, exited the bathroom, looking down, and pulling up his zipper.

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I side-stepped out of the doorway and stood with my back to the hall wall. Splashes sounded on the bathroom floor, as all the water and waste from the toilet ran over the bowl. I hung my head because it was surprising to whoever the man was, but it was just another day for me and Josephine.

The man yelped. His voice muffled as he must have turned back to peer into the bathroom. Josephine moaned. I expected an argument, so I covered my ears, fleeing to the butler's pantry where I locked myself in like I had last night and propped my head against the paper towels, falling asleep again.

Later, my eyes eased open. The floor was hard, reminding me I wasn't in my usual bed. I recalled what happened that had forced me to take shelter there. The pantry wasn't a bad place to be. Some books and a snack would make a nice little room. I'd liked sharing the pantry with Remy the night before. He'd snuggled into my side and said, *Pleasant dreams, Sabine*. I always liked hearing him say my name. I could hear that he loved me.

I unlatched and opened the swinging door into the dining room. The slanted light through the bay windows whispered midmorning. I unbolted the swinging door into the kitchen and peeked in. No one was stirring. The clock on the stove said 11:00 a.m. I jumped up at the sink to peer out the window, Josephine's car was gone.

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There was no one else in the house. The door to Josephine's room stood open. The smell of sewer filled the air, with stale cigarette smoke and alcohol. I peeked into the bathroom from the hall door. The man had thrown the only towel on the floor over the filthy water from the toilet.

I crossed the hall to the kitchen and got myself another box of cereal and walked around the house, eating. Something drew me to the room where Marvin had slept. The pull was a strange feeling, an urgent message coming from Old Dan, my grandfather. He pushed at me as I wandered through the dining room, living room, and then crossed the wide foyer to enter the parlor, exactly like the living room, but furnished with an old bed, a nightstand, and a rocking chair. Marvin's room. Josephine called it a parlor.

I liked the sound of that word, parlor. "Step into my parlor said the spider to the fly." Yes, that's the kind of parlor the Dunn house would have. A fireplace with surrounding cabinetry lined the outer wall. Wooden Venetian blinds on all the windows were always drawn closed, making the room dark—the room Marvin would sneak into when he came home late after he and Josephine fought, the main reason I would never put myself to bed there.

I crumpled the empty cereal box and left it on Marvin's tidy bed, glancing at the one I'd already left on the bedside table.

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Old Dan's pushing me toward the room confused me. Why does he want me in here? I approached the closet door and stepped twice on loose floor boards, causing squeaks. I bounced on the boards, curious about their movement. Taking a deep breath, I swung the two doors open. The racks and shelves were empty. Marvin's belongings were gone. I smiled again. Finally. But then it hit me, this wasn't final. Marvin would be back, and he had a key. He'd left in a hurry and there was something he'd left on purpose. He'd be back. Was that what you wanted me to know, Old Dan?

I skirted the grand staircase, as I returned to the back of the house. I entered Josephine's room and played with some of her stuff and then I saw something that made me leave. Remy peered at me from the other side of the screened door, and then we walked to Ms. Emily's.

Emily

Emily was relieved when she spotted Sabine and Remy walking down the paved road to her driveway. The child had on the same clothes she'd seen her in two days before. As she continued to weed her garden, on her knees beside the plot, Emily was pleased she'd restocked the bottom drawer of the chest in her guest room with larger sizes. Sabine had had a recent growth spurt.

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Emily stood to welcome them. “I was just thinking it was time to stop for some water. Glad you two came by. I missed you yesterday.” They sat on the screened porch where Remy went straight to the water bowl Emily kept for him. She offered Sabine a plate of apple slices and a glass of orange juice.

The sky was clear and the sun bright. Sabine nibbled around the peeling of the apple slices, placing the red skin on the napkin in front of her.

The ceiling fan whirred overhead as Emily assessed Sabine’s appearance. Scratching her forehead, Emily said, “I have some pots ready for those mountain laurel seeds we picked up, Sabine.”

Sabine pulled some seeds from her pocket. “I’ve been carrying them.”

Emily cupped her hands to create a bowl and Sabine dropped the seeds in her palm. “Ah, you’ve got yours ready. I’ll put them in the coffee can with mine. First thing you need to do is scuff them. They need scratches on them. Spread them on the concrete and step on them and then you can plant and water them.”

Emily remained in her rocker while Sabine went through the steps to plant the mountain laurel seeds as Remy meandered around the yard. Sabine worked to scarify the seeds while Emily pondered how to occupy the child and continue to keep her trust.

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When they went inside the kitchen, Emily said, “I bought some new bath salts. It smells like heaven. You want to try it? We can wash your hair and use that cream rinse you like. You know, play beauty parlor.”

“Okay.” Sabine’s eyes glistened. “I do need to get my hair washed. Josephine’s brush gets stuck.”

“Okay, then. I want you to run a brush over my hair too. That feels good, doesn’t it?” Emily ran her fingers through her own wavy hair. “Your teeth look pretty. That toothbrush still working out for you? I picked up a pretty purple one with glitter in the handle.” Emily could tell Sabine hadn’t been brushing her teeth.

“I do need a new one, Ms. Emily. Someone moved it and I can’t find it. This time I’ll put it in the cabinet.”

Emily inhaled, trying not to show her frustration. *Last I saw Josephine, her teeth were sparkling white. Why can’t she make sure this child has access to a proper toothbrush?* Her stomach knotted at the thought of the neglect Sabine endured. The child was special in so many ways and should have been cherished, but Josephine, well, Josephine was Josephine.

In the tub with warm water running, Sabine tilted her face to the ceiling, scrunching her eyes, her lips frozen in a closed smile. The sight broke Emily’s heart. She struggled to hide her

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tears each time the little girl prepared to go back across the road to an uncertain existence.

Emily sat on the side of the tub and poured warm fragrant water down Sabine's back and combed crème rinse through her once-tangled hair. She wished she could have done the same for Sabine's mother when she was still a girl, but Josephine had been prickly, a secretive child. At the time, Old Dan avoided Emily too and would not allow visitors, and then Josephine was gone.

"What happened to your toes, sweetie?" Emily asked.

"I guess my shoes rubbed them," Sabine said, planting her feet against the front of the tub under the faucet.

After Sabine was out of the tub and toweled off, Emily took supplies from her medicine cabinet, dabbed antiseptic between Sabine's toes, and wrapped flesh-colored bandages over the sores.

"You let me check those tomorrow and we'll clean and doctor them again," Emily held the child's feet in her lap as Sabine was wrapped in a towel and perched on the lid of the toilet. "What about this scratch on your calf? What happened there?" Emily caressed Sabine's leg.

"I can't remember," Sabine said, twisting her leg and running her hand over the scrape. "I saw it when I got home yesterday."

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Emily wondered if Sabine's shots were up to date and hoped whatever had caused the scratch wasn't rusty or dirty. She put antiseptic on Sabine's leg and suggested the child try to keep it clean. "Where'd you get home from? I heard Josephine had been looking for you."

Sabine flinched and pulled her feet from Emily's lap. "Uh, I meant inside. I was outside with Remy all day. I went inside."

Emily gave up the questioning. Sabine would often bolt if Emily asked too many questions. They went to the kitchen where she made Sabine a tuna salad sandwich and sat at the table with her, a plate of oatmeal cookies and a glass of milk between them. Emily eased into asking her about her whereabouts on the previous day again. "When Jason came by with the mail, he said Josephine was looking for you."

"Oh, I was there, outside." Sabine held a cookie in front of her face, avoiding eye contact. Her eyes had widened.

They played Old Maid, Sabine continuing to dodge Emily's questions. "How about we paint your nails. You always like that. I have a new color. Your grandmother Nadine and I always did each other's nails."

"No thanks. I need to get home. I sure liked the bath and shampoo, and thank you for the sandwich."

"Okay. I think you need to come check those seeds every day. They're going to need water," Emily said, handing Sabine

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a brown paper bag. “Here’s something to take home with you. I put a packet of bath salts in there, the purple toothbrush, a couple of oatmeal cookies and an apple.” Emily held a floral bag with cords for handles. “In here are two pair of fresh panties, some clean outfits, and a pair of those slip-on sneakers. That might help keep your toes from getting irritated. They’re bright pink.” Emily’s eyes squeezed to slits in a grin.

After glancing in the bag, Sabine said, “Ooh. Thanks, Ms. Emily. I’ll hide the toothbrush this time. And, I already know where I’m going to keep these clothes.”

“If you have dirty clothes you’d like washed, bring them with you next time in that bag, Sabine. I can throw them in the wash with mine. I’ll wash the ones you wore today.”

“Okay.” Sabine waved and headed down the road.

Emily covered her lips with her fingers, willing herself not to break down. She walked a fine line with Josephine. Emily had known the young woman since she was an infant. The law required Josephine to do better, or her child could be taken, but the law didn’t have the ability to assure Emily that Sabine could fit in just anyone’s home. She imagined Sabine would feel like a caged animal and rebel. Emily had approached Josephine in the past, wanting to be able to check on both mother and child to help arrange a housekeeping service and child care.

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Josephine was irrational, and Emily's offer was received as a threat even though Emily pointed out that she'd needed help when her own son was little. Josephine ranted that she couldn't tolerate strangers in her house, ironic because Emily knew there was a steady stream of strange people in and out of the Dunn place.

Their confrontation had made things worse for a while, and Sabine had been forbidden to come to Emily's. Emily closed her eyes, tilting her face to the sun. *Sabine is smart and resilient. I just have to keep letting her know she can trust me. Something happened yesterday and she doesn't want me to know.*

Sabine

I put the bags Ms. Emily had given me on a shelf in the butler's pantry when I got home. Josephine came back after dark with pizza. She left the box on the kitchen table, went to her room, and closed the door. Remy and I sat on the living room floor looking at magazines by the light of a reading lamp also on the floor.

I didn't bother knocking on Josephine's door when I went outside. Remy followed me. The moon overhead threw shadows over the yard. A feral cat leapt from the old wringer washing machine on the porch, causing me to jump and scream. Remy

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glanced at me and rolled his eyes. He cursed the cat and said, “We’ve seen that damn cat do that almost every night.”

Remy wandered away and past the cistern and windmill. I picked up a dead vine and wrapped it around my hand, counting the circles as I thought about what might happen if Ms. Emily found out Marvin was gone. Maybe Ms. Emily would think it was good. I didn’t know for sure, but I knew I’d come close to being caught in a lie.

After Remy did his business, we headed to the house. Stepping into the back hall, I wanted to go into the kitchen for pizza, but Old Dan was there. His tall body was transparent as he changed into a dark cloud and floated past the tall, wood-toned, bead board cabinets that lined all the walls. The shadow dropped to the floor in front of the door to the back stairwell on the opposite side of the kitchen. The narrow stairs led to the old servant’s hall behind the upstairs foyer. The cloud disappeared, sucked under the door, like the steam that rose from Ms. Emily’s boiling pots on her stove and up through her vent.

The back stairs were littered with old bowls, cooking utensils, cookbooks, and an assortment of other stuff that had nothing to do with a kitchen. If someone wanted to go up the stairs, they’d have to climb over about five steps to reach one without clutter.

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Something scampered across the wood floor. The scurrying noise, tiny claws scratching, caused me to wince and turn toward the movement I'd caught out of the corner of my eye. Is it a mouse or Old Dan teasing me? Is he trying to scare me or tell me something? He almost never shows himself down here and when he does something always happens. Now, he's been here twice in one day.

I sat on the floor in the hall, waiting my grandfather out. Two geckos meandered around the back hall, between Josephine's room and the kitchen. Sometimes they would be together, scurrying after each other, and other times they would be on opposite walls, peering across the way. They sat in the sun in the windowsill, or basked on the wooden floor in the light thrown through the transom. I liked to watch them. I did the same things they liked: sitting in the light, looking around with wide eyes at other living things.

One day there had been only one gecko, and the other one never reappeared. Then there was a gecko on the floor motionless in front of Josephine's bedroom door. For days the carcass changed from brown to almost black, stiffening. It was a game for me to see if Josephine would bend over and pick up the body. Where was his friend? I thought about them often. But, they hadn't been the scurrying feet I'd heard earlier.

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I went into the kitchen and sat at the table to eat a slice pizza, giving Old Dan time to settle down. I wasn't really hungry because Ms. Emily had given me plenty to eat. Maybe my grandfather was trying to tell me something. I still had a feeling about him I couldn't explain. His boots sounded heavy in the upstairs hall.

After I'd left the trash in Marvin's room earlier, I wandered into Josephine's room while she was still gone. The big four poster bed was unmade as usual. A sofa, two chairs, an armoire, two side tables and a large standing mirror took up the rest of the room. If it had been kept tidy, the room would have been beautiful, but it was messy with clothing thrown on the furniture and floor, unemptied ashtrays, and unwashed glasses.

I picked up one of Josephine's long silk scarves and tied it over my head, leaving the tails trailing, pretending I had long, flowing hair, like Rapunzel. I twirled causing my pretend hair to move in the breeze as I watched myself in the full-length mirror. Silk hair fell over my shoulders and down my back, like Josephine's. I'd danced in front of the mirror, humming a tune I'd heard Josephine play on the piano. And then, the reflection behind me caused me to gasp.

A loaded shotgun stood on its stock behind the draperies in a corner. Months ago, Josephine showed me where it was kept, and said, "You steer clear of that loaded gun, Sabine. It's not for

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kids. But, if I ever tell you to run get it, you do what I say with no questions.”

I turned toward the gun, staring at the stock. Marvin’s things were gone. He should have taken the gun. I had an urge to move the weapon and hide it, like my need to hide my toothbrush, but I didn’t want to touch it. Is Old Dan telling me to hide the shotgun? He must know Marvin’s gone. Daniel Dunn almost never comes downstairs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1999, Chambers County, Texas

SABINE UNLOCKED THE back door of the Dunn House as the phone rang in the kitchen. She lifted the receiver from the old wall phone. “Good afternoon, Dunn House.”

“You were supposed to call me when you got there.” June’s voice sounded with relief and some irritation. “I’ve been calling your cell.”

“I just walked in the door. I stopped by Daisy’s to see their new dog, and she insisted I stay for lunch. I would’ve called eventually. I must have left my phone there.”

“Yes, they have your phone. Just be glad you have people worried about your safety. How’s the house?”

“The house is fine. Daisy and Dale have kept up the yard. It looks just like the day I left. Of course, I’ve only managed to walk from the back door to the kitchen phone.”

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June sighed. “You answered professionally. Are you considering reopening for business?”

“No, not me. I thought you might be someone inquiring about an old ad or something. I didn’t want to confuse them. But, I guess now, I’ve confused you.” Sabine ran her finger over the top of the bulletin board hanging by the phone. There was no sign of dust. *Daisy is so efficient.* She turned to face the kitchen window and saw a stack of mail on the farm table.

“Well, I’ll let you get settled. If you don’t want to spend the night there alone, the kids and I can come over and stay with you. I think you should get a dog. Maybe Dale could help you find one.”

“I appreciate your concerns, June, but I’m not moving in.” Sabine was glad the hand planted on her hip couldn’t be seen through the phone line.

“I know. I’m sure it’s not easy stepping back into the Dunn place and having all the memories rush in.”

“I haven’t had the chance, June. I’ve been on the phone with you since I walked in the door.” Her voice betrayed her irritation, and she wanted to hang up before June launched into an impromptu therapy session. “Trust me, I’d lived in this house for a long time by myself. I know all the memories that have been stored here, mine and all the ghosts. Thanks for the offer of a slumber party. Maybe another time.”

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“Okay, uh, well, I’m just trying to help. It can’t be easy.”

“Right. I know you are. I have my laptop, a good book, and apparently a lot of mail to read. Maybe I’ll do a little gardening. Dale’s coming later to go over the financials. I’ll be fine and busy. But, I do need some alone time to decide what I’ll do with this place. If I need you, I’ll call. I promise.”

“Okay. I just worry about you, you know. Like I should’ve been there for you back then when you needed someone. I couldn’t sleep last night.” June went silent and Sabine didn’t feel like filling in the blanks of her sister’s guilt.

“June, you’re not responsible for me, not now and certainly not for my life as a child. You were a child and not responsible for Josephine or anyone but yourself, and now, your own children. What I want more than anything is for you to enjoy your beautiful family.”

“Okay. I get it. I’ll leave you alone, but be sure to call and invite me over when you’re ready.”

“Yeah, I will. You and the kids will be my first guests. And, that handsome husband of yours can come too if he’s not off delivering a foal.”

They hung up. Sabine crossed the hall and put her suitcase next to the settee in Josephine’s old room. The draperies had been drawn back allowing sunlight to enter through recently cleaned windows. The window coverings were newer ones than

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Josephine had. The shotgun was long gone from the hiding place, taken by the sheriff many years ago. It was no longer the dungeon of a room that Josephine had occupied, musty and closed in darkness, a cavern of fear. Now it was a pleasant suite filled with light and an airy freshness, a room Sabine wouldn't mind sleeping in.

She unpacked and took her toiletry bag to the bathroom. White tile gleamed under period lighting. A fresh scent of lavender cleaner hung in the air. Daisy had set out fresh white towels on a vintage French style armchair, reupholstered in black faux leather, next to the tub. A crystal vase of fuchsia zinnias from the yard sat beside the sink on the marble-topped vanity. It looked nothing like the room she and Josephine had shared with the seldom-functional toilet. She opened the linen cabinet, half expecting to see the purple glitter toothbrush she'd hidden there. The deep interior shelves were stocked with fresh linens and decorative bottles of bath salts, shampoo, and lotion, leftovers from the days the house had been a bed and breakfast.

Sabine went through the bedroom, picked up the book she'd brought, and headed to the kitchen for a glass of water. The fridge interior was sparkling clean and stocked with juices, milk, and a pitcher of lemonade. Sabine poured herself a glass of lemonade and glanced at the manila envelope from her attorney's office sitting on the table.

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She opened the thick envelope and found it was full of smaller, letter-sized ones. They were all handwritten, addressed to her Houston post office box, but no name. She opened one. “Ah, oh my.” Her eyes burned with tears as she lowered herself into one of the mismatched chairs at the table. It was a letter from a cafeteria worker at the local elementary, thanking an anonymous benefactor for a donation that paid children’s overdue lunch tickets. An extensive list of others helped by the donation filled the page. It was simply written, but beautiful in the appreciation it expressed.

Sabine opened another envelope with a note expressing similar gratitude for school supplies, funds for the book fair, Christmas gifts for school parties, and field trips. She read several more letters. Her attorney had followed her instructions and set up the account she’d requested to make sure no other child had to endure the embarrassment she’d had at the public school. All the seemingly benign activities that separated children had been covered. She could tell from the notes that the specifications she’d outline had been followed. *This is also my therapy.*

Sabine took her drink and book outside to sit on the back porch. She eased into the wicker swing, setting the book beside her. June was right. It would have been nice to have a little dog

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curled up at her feet or on the swing next to her. She could envision Remy or Augie, her childhood dogs, there.

Movement across the yard, close to the tack shed, drew Sabine's eye, something mostly black with white markings. She smiled, wondering if it was the offspring of one of her favorite feral cats, one she'd named Pippi. Maybe the progenies of that amazing feline were keeping the barn and tack room free of rodents.

The garden's raised beds reminded Sabine of her brother, Billy, and Emily. Both of them were always with her and always would be, part of her spirit and skin. They'd loved to work in the garden. She couldn't look at the kitchen table without seeing Billy in the kitchen scrambling eggs, or making grilled cheese sandwiches. She couldn't look at the old clothesline without seeing his lanky blue-jeaned legs sauntering toward her, his shirttail blowing behind him, his handsome dimpled smile dominating his face. She couldn't look at the pergola he'd designed without remembering his creativity and the parties celebrated there.

Besides a father, the one thing Sabine had always longed for, had been a brother. When he'd finally arrived, Sabine recalled being speechless and painfully awkward. But, he'd still looked at her like she was the most beautiful thing in the world. She

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would always believe that he'd been real and that what he saw in her was real too.

Now, older, Sabine recognized the dilemma Emily had had, not knowing for sure the things that Sabine had experienced as a little girl in the Dunn house. She hadn't confided in Emily—it hadn't been distrust but the awareness that something would have had to have been done and Sabine nor Emily would have control over what that something would've been. Sabine gazed past the stables to a field of hay like she'd done so many times from that porch.

1977

The gecko carcass disappeared after the plumber left. I thought the plumber was one of Josephine's friends from Buck's Bar. He even cleaned the bathroom floor.

For a while things were a little better. Josephine's friends tried to help her out, do things for her, run errands. Some of them brought me treats, little toys and candy. They brought food: snacks mostly to go with their alcohol. Maybe it was because Wendell was there now since Marvin was gone. Maybe Wendell brought a better group of drunks. Or, maybe they wanted something.

Ms. Emily had found out Marvin was gone. She'd chatted with the county sheriff in the post office and learned that Marvin

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Cole got his final paycheck and was told to leave the county. Ms. Emily dropped the hint that she knew Marvin was gone.

As I twisted on the tire swing in Emily's yard I heard her talking on the phone with her friend, Margaret Lawson. "This whole thing is worrisome, Margaret. Maybe Marvin was Josephine's tether, keeping her grounded. You know, another adult in the house to make decisions. Now, she's surrounded by people who are supposed to know the law, but I'm not feeling good about this. I don't know what to think."

Maybe Ms. Emily was right. I didn't think so, because Marvin could be dangerous, hitting Josephine. But the part about him keeping Josephine in line could've been true. After he left, seemed like all hell broke loose.

I depended on Ms. Emily to show me the way, but she was just as confused as I was most of the time, about Josephine, that is. Not many of my experiences applied to other kids. I was careful not to mention many things that happened at my house.

It was one of those summer days when darkness comes after 8:30 p.m. I walked to Ms. Emily's and sat with her in the yard eating sandwiches and cookies. At dusk I returned to the Dunn house and into the kitchen to get a glass of water before going to bed.

There was laughter and talking. Smoke seeped into the hall under the door of Josephine's room. The spirit of my

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grandmother, Nadine, called me to her with a crooked finger as she was silhouetted in the front foyer against the light coming through the wide front door. I shook my head, afraid, because she'd never ask me to come to her before.

One of Josephine's friends, Ray, he called himself, followed me into the kitchen and stared at me. I said hello, then tried to ignore him. He kept staring, giving me the creeps.

My stomach knotted and my brain was a mess of ideas about how I could get away from him. I went to the mattress porch and crawled under the covers to hide. I wasn't sure what might happen if I tried to lock myself in the butler's pantry. He might have followed me there and locked us both in. Remy stayed on the back porch.

I fell asleep and then felt someone touching me. I opened my eyes, but lay still, knowing it was the Ray guy. I could smell him. Remy barked from the porch and scratched at the door. The noises made me think someone would come see what was wrong. But no one did, even when Remy snarled and barked louder. His barks sometimes rose into a panicked squeal, like he was injured. He sounded frantic to get at Ray.

I tried to keep my breath regular, so Ray wouldn't know I was awake. I talked to my grandmother, Nadine, in my mind. I left myself, lifted out of my body, so I wouldn't think about the man. Nadine had tried to warn me.

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Remy snarled and barked on the other side of the door. I felt every wrinkle in the crumpled blanket. As I was curled on my side, I pushed my thumb into one of the white buttons in the mattress until my thumb went numb. I thought about Ms. Emily's big jar full of buttons. I could see the shapes and colors until Ray finally got up and left. He hurried to his car and drove away.

I was sure Remy's barking and scratching at the sun porch door had made Ray leave. Remy's yelping sounded vicious all the way to the guy's car. Ray cried out twice. I wondered why Josephine or her guests didn't open the door to see what the commotion was. I got up and went outside and marched through the yard with Remy beside me.

I finally ran toward the vine-covered windmill, Remy following. We hid there, but no one looked for me, even though I'd slammed the back door as hard as I could. I sat with my head on my knees, feeling the shame crawling over me, my stomach still knotted.

There was a stillness to the night, a quiet before a storm. The sky was inky dark and full of stars above, but lightning flashed in the distance, and a rumble of anger sounded in the thunder. I smiled at Josephine's panic about storms. It was a mean smile, one that wished her dead. And, it seemed to me the storm was coming for her.

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I was confused about my own feelings, which I couldn't name. I lost track of time. The storm moved closer, and rain blew sideways. Remy moved under the shelter of the grapevines strung from the windmill to the cistern, but I stood in the rain, allowing it to drench my clothing and wash over my skin. I tempted lightning to strike me. The smell of the loaded droplets flooded my nostrils and cleansed the air around me.

Rainwater ran down me carrying the prickles of my disgrace down the cracks in the mud toward the creek, to flow into the river, the bay, and out into the Gulf of Mexico, just a few miles away. My salty tears would come back to me, blown over the spray of the waves washing up on Bolivar beach. I could see the water flowing, following the map in my mind. I had walked the gullies and creek a hundred times.

The air buzzed with the storm. I had connected with the water, somehow. I wanted to be the thread of a human who could stand with water, earth, air—a responsibility. The elementals could soothe me when my mother wouldn't. Those elements raised me.

Frogs croaked around the yard, and the sound echoed toward the creek. Their songs filled the night air and eased me to settle into the weedy patch of ground that hugged me. The steady pulsing of the frogs calmed the night. I slept behind the cistern, sitting up with my back against the cement shell. As dawn broke,

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I awakened, wet with dew and the night rain. My clothes and hair hung heavy. I rolled my stiff neck. My eyes itched.

Remy stood and shook, spraying drops of water around him. He told me even a dog would think to get under something so the dew wouldn't cling to him. He could be grouchy sometimes. I grinned at Remy's scolding. His rage the previous night had been as strong as mine. He'd been my only protector. I peered around the cistern at the driveway. There were no cars.

"I had to do it, Remy. I needed to get clean."

As we sat there by the cistern, there was movement beyond the bushes, thick where the tree line began. The coat of an animal, a beautiful fur moved through the brush. A sleek bobcat stalked a gopher, not far from where I sat. The cat stopped and looked at me. His eyes went right into my eyes. We knew each other.

There was no fear between me and the animal. The cat went on with the hunt. I was seen—part of something much bigger than Josephine's kingdom, and the creatures showed me respect. Josephine always preached about respect, but she didn't even know what it was.

I walked to the house, pulling the thick braid over my shoulder. Emily had plaited my hair the previous day. I wrung the water from the long tail. Remy saw the cat and ran behind

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me touching the back of my leg with a moist nose as I returned to the world of Josephine.

Her bedroom door was closed. She was gone. Josephine's group was probably out for brunch. They'd encircled her during the storm; otherwise she'd have panicked, and I would've heard her screaming. She always screamed during thunder storms.

I went into the bathroom to get a towel and dry the dampness, but I couldn't rid myself of the mess forever stuck to me before the storm. I was like the wood grain that darkens and shines when rubbed with oil, but reveals the scrapes and scars at last. They are there, even when disguised.

CHAPTER NINE

1999 CHAMBERS COUNTY, Texas

SABINE EXPECTED A rush of memories about Emily when she returned to Dunn House. Daily thoughts of the gentle woman were often triggered by the smell of cookies baking, the sight of fresh produce at the farmer's market, or the texture of clean white sheets. Sabine hadn't anticipated recollections of herself as a child, especially her experience with Remy and the bobcat. She'd forgotten how powerful it had felt at the time and how deflating it had been to return to the back porch and the world of Josephine.

Sabine opened the drawers of the antique bureau, and lavender fragrance wafted out. The bedroom had belonged to Ms. Emily and Josephine and before them, Nadine, Sabine's grandmother, and Elizabeth, her great grandmother.

Not planning to stay long enough to unpack, Sabine only planned on a few days. However, the truth was her sabbatical would last until the fall. *I'll play it by ear. Besides, I don't even*

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know what to do with this place. I don't need to explain myself to anyone.

All the drawers were empty except the deepest one on the bottom, full of drawings. Some were the ones Sabine had done on the backs of envelopes or brought from school with her name written across the bottom in her immature print. Others she didn't recognize, probably the artwork of Billy, June, or the twins. Were the twins even in school before they'd been adopted? Sabine couldn't remember what Josephine and Ms. Emily had told her.

Sabine

1981

When I was nine, going to school caused a whole new set of problems for me and Josephine. It was a different world full of rules than I was used to. My mother wasn't going to follow rules either. I had to figure it out myself. None of my siblings had attended school past the second grade while they'd lived with our mother.

Josephine ranted to Wendell Weems on one of his visits. They sat at the cluttered kitchen table. "Fuck those people," Josephine said. "Do they think I have time to run down to school any time they can't keep Sabine in her seat, or she doesn't ask permission to leave the room?"

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It was late afternoon. Josephine hadn't had enough vodka to mellow her mood. I'd handed her the note when I'd arrived home from school on the bus. Wendell hadn't left soon enough. He sat at the table watching Josephine have one of her hissy fits.

First, Josephine raised her voice at Wendell. "I have better things to do than go sit in Ms. Simpson's office and listen to her complain and imply that I'm a bad mother. They get paid to manage children. Apparently, Sabine can learn just fine standing up or not even in the classroom. Her grades are perfect, every grade an A." She whirled around to me. "Tell them I'm not coming to the school, Sabine. If I do, they'll wish I hadn't." She shook her finger in my face as if I was Mrs. Simpson.

"Maybe you should consider sending her to private school," Wendell said. "My kids did okay there, and we got far fewer notes of complaint. They all did just fine. Little Rue was Chi Omega before she got pregnant and dropped out of LSU." He swirled his smudged crystal glass of vodka. "Just keep the tuition paid and they pretty much leave you alone."

I was surprised by Wendell's low bar of achievement for his kids. His proposal for solving any problem was to throw money at it. As far as I knew, Josephine didn't have any money. Why would we be living in a run-down house with no food if Josephine had money? She didn't ever pay the bills on time. I didn't have any store bought clothes. Was he offering to pay?

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I squinted at Wendell, not because I didn't like his idea, but because I couldn't imagine him being a grandfather and seeking out my young mother as a friend. His true character had begun to dawn on me that day.

"I'm not paying for private school, Wendell," Josephine insisted. I winced as she turned back to me. "Sabine, you're just going to have to do better. Do what those assholes tell you to do, and keep your mouth shut. Lord knows I didn't like them telling me what to do either. Just bide your time and you can quit when you're old enough."

I stood at the end of the table in the kitchen watching Josephine and Wendell discuss my future. Josephine's comments were foolish. I was going to college and I believed I couldn't do that if I quit school. I'd been reading for a long time and decided an education was the key to leaving Josephine's house.

"You're supposed to sign that note, Josephine," I said. "I need to take it back to school."

"Well, you tell your teacher I looked at it and refused to sign it."

"Humpf. That's embarrassing."

"Well, maybe you'll think twice about wandering around at school like you're some kind of special kid. If you don't want to be embarrassed, don't do embarrassing things." Josephine

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slammed her fist down on the table causing the glasses and bottle to rattle. “Get it, Sabine. Quit embarrassing yourself. Do what you’re supposed to do so they’ll leave me alone. I did my time at that fucking school. I’m not going back down there again!”

I returned to school and told Mrs. Simpson what Josephine had said. “I don’t think you want her to come down here, Mrs. Simpson,” I explained. “She’s ticked off. I’m supposed to try to fucking do better. Can we work something out here?” I stood in front of the principal’s desk, my hands raised in apology for my mother, hoping Mrs. Simpson could understand the role-reversal playing out in front of her. She let me know real quick my language needed work. I’d read an article about that very role reversal thing in a magazine in the counselor’s office and recognized me and Josephine right off the bat.

Mrs. Simpson had been sympathetic to my problem and talked with the teachers about allowing me to tutor other students and take on extra assignments to keep from becoming bored in the classroom. I was allowed to organize bookshelves, help the librarian and various other tasks they brainstormed to keep me busy.

“Sabine, I’m willing to give you a chance to prove your intelligence in another area,” Mrs. Simpson said. “Getting along with your peers and authority is a skill you must have. Everyone

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is willing to work on this, but you have to mind that bad language. We cannot allow that talk on this campus with anyone, me, the teacher, staff, or students. Respect for yourself and others begins with how you talk to us.”

Some of my teachers and the principal would do almost anything to keep Josephine from coming on the campus and so would I. Others accused me of being coddled. However, I was pretty sure I wasn't spoiled. We were scurrying like ants getting ready for winter to think of things to keep Josephine out of our hair. Most of the staff agreed—no one, not even the school nurse or counselor wanted to make a home visit and meet with my mother on her turf.

Josephine's reputation was a burden. Some of the teachers remembered June and Billy and some even remembered Josephine as a student. They were aware of the rumors about Josephine and her drinking.

Neighbor kids had been a pain for me, too. I had to ride the bus daily with Dale Dawson and his cohorts. I refused to call him Booger because, even though I didn't like many of the things he'd done, he and I were equally pathetic when it came to our mothers.

School caused me as many problems as some of Josephine's friends. Not all the teachers were accommodating. I was aware of things I couldn't explain. I knew a boy, my best friend, who

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often slouched in his chair. He was taller than anyone in our grade and placed his hand on the floor, huddled over his paper. He spread his body as thin as he could get it over every surface, like Flat Stanley.

The teacher had called his name constantly, “Reggie Hawkins, sit up, I’m not going to tell you again. I’m going to start calling you ‘Slouch’.” She would tell him again, and again, until I just wanted to pull her hair out. I had to remind myself about the problems my reaction might cause with Josephine. When we left the classroom, that’s exactly what other students called him, Slouch, and then laughed and pointed.

Reggie had tried to comply with the teacher’s request, but eventually his body would slump to accommodate his ability to think clearly. I had been sent to the office several times for butting in. There was no way to explain why I felt I needed to advocate for him. I simply knew if I was the teacher, I’d allow him to do his work on the floor. His body needed contact with the surface, otherwise he felt as if he were floating, and couldn’t think.

I had somehow absorbed the feeling from him, a dizziness that caused him to stagger and blink, refocusing at every movement. The more parts of his body that were on the floor, or on a surface, the clearer he could think. I would’ve joined him there, on the floor, if I could, covered him with a weighted

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blanket, or had the other kids gather around with me and hold our hands on him.

Reggie was the first time I'd felt the intense feelings of someone else. I was tougher than him and stubborn. His feelings covered me with sadness because the fight had gone out of him.

The similarities between the look on Reggie's face and the drunks who staggered out of Josephine's bedroom after a party were stunning. He needed to hold on to something to right himself. I was determined to be that something.

I stared at the ceiling at night thinking about how I could help Reggie. I had an idea. I brought him the large rusted bolts I picked up from the yard. We put them in his socks around his ankles and in sweat bands around his wrists. "Weights, Reggie," I said. "They'll keep you aware and grounded"

Mrs. Patterson took them away. The teacher's fear the weights could be used as weapons had been more important than his need for grounding. I had never seen Reggie even think about such a thing, weapons. He tolerated more teasing than anyone at school. I was more likely to punch someone in the throat, just thinking about how the adults continued to place obstacles in front of Reggie. I cried myself to sleep sometimes.

Reggie Hawkins was my lunch companion. He loved listening to my stories about animals. I told him about my encounter with the bobcat and he believed me. His eyes watered

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as he stared at me. No one else had ever listened to me like Reggie.

Reggie and his family had moved away at the end of third grade, and I ate lunch alone after that. I wondered if he ever experienced a teacher who would allow him to think clearly. I was glad he escaped Mrs. Patterson and the nickname, Slouch.

I later found out Mrs. Patterson was the originator of Dale Dawson's nickname, Booger. No telling what Dale was doing when he got that name. There are probably some dried up boogers under the desks in Mrs. Patterson's room. Learning this confirmed my decision that I would not be one of those to call him by his nickname.

At the age of eight I still stayed away from Dale Dawson. He was not my friend, but he wasn't my enemy either. Dale and I were outcasts, victims of the same pranks by other kids. I didn't like him, but I could have some sympathy for his situation.

"Sabine, mind your intentions," Ms. Emily told me. "If they're good and helpful to yourself and others, they're good. If they're spiteful, they're not good. Always have good intentions."

I knew what Emily said was true, but why should anyone have to explain good intentions, and why should anyone else have to fit anywhere but their own reality. Her philosophy sounded well and good, but I'd yet to see it play out in real life except maybe in her own yard.

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Emily would recoil at the things I would tell her about my school day and comments that teachers and other students made. She'd cluck her tongue and shake her head, the sparkle disappearing from her eyes. It made me sick to my stomach that the words I repeated about my day at school could take the sparkle from Ms. Emily's eyes.

Bullying had been rampant, but the kids were not the only ones doing it. Sometimes, a teacher could be much worse, "Damien stand in line and be quiet. No wonder your mother drops you off at school early." His mother works at a bakery, bitch, and has to be there very early.

Damien had a personality. I liked watching him and hearing his voice. How did those teachers keep their jobs talking that way? A slight to Damien and his mother, a hard working woman, all in one breath, shameful.

I formed a low opinion of authority. I was able to sit in the principal's office for most of the day and still make perfect grades. The office had better air conditioning, and the chairs had comfortable upholstery. The hot bed of activity—the principal's office was the place to stay up on what was going on. I had access to some interesting reading material. Josephine's right, this place is fucked up.

Josephine had loved The Beatles, especially John Lennon. She'd regretted the day they broke up. She would play the music

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on a record player in her room, and I could hear it from my mattress where I fell in love with the Beatles, too. That's about the only thing Josephine and I could agree on other than our desire to revamp the public school system.

Sabine

1999 Chambers County, Texas

Over the years, Sabine had looked for the sheet music she'd given Josephine one Christmas. It was Beatles songs. She'd searched the piano bench first and then every closet and drawer in the house. Now, as an adult, she found the yellowed pages under the drawings in the bottom drawer of the antique bureau in Josephine's old room. *Where has all this stuff been?*

The collection in the drawer was memories, but were they Josephine's or Emily's. *Does it matter anymore? They're both gone.*

CHAPTER TEN

Sabine

1981, Chambers County, Texas

I WAS EIGHT, in third grade, when John Lennon was assassinated in New York City. Josephine was in bed when I got home from school. This happened sometimes. Josephine would crawl in bed and stay for a while, and there was no use coaxing. John Lennon was dead—Josephine was too miserable to get out of bed.

Because Josephine listened to the Beatles' albums over and over, I knew their names and loved the music. I also knew his music after he married Ono. The words were the best part. I think you can know someone's soul from their words.

I was sad someone killed him, but I didn't cry. I'd never seen him in person, but neither had Josephine. Maybe she'd get better after a few weeks.

My mother staying in her room worked out okay for me—no parties. I didn't have to worry about people I didn't know

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coming in the house. Josephine's sadness would go away, but while it was there, my life was easier.

Shortly before Halloween, Ms. Emily asked, in the light-hearted way she had when she was trying to get information, "Sabine, what's Josephine been up to? I haven't seen her out in a while. Is she feeling okay?" She'd asked before, but I didn't tell her Josephine wouldn't leave her room.

"She's in bed," I said, as I draped myself over the tire swing in her backyard and twisted the ropes to make me spin. "She's been in bed for a long time. She's sad."

"What's she sad about?" Emily asked, putting her rake to the side and standing closer to the swing.

"John Lennon died," I said, picking up my feet to allow me to twirl. "He was a Beatle."

"Sweetie, John Lennon died last year before Christmas. It's almost December again. Has Josephine been sad all this time?" Emily grabbed the tire and stopped the spin. Her forehead wrinkled over her squiggly eyebrows when I looked up at her.

I was surprised so much time had passed too and that Ms. Emily knew John Lennon. "Yes ma'am. She's real sad, for a long time." I lowered my head, but it was still spinning.

"Well, I'm going to have to go see about her, sunshine. That's too long to be sad. She's not going to want me to intrude,

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but I need to make sure she's okay." She muttered the last part under her breath, but I heard.

It was the first time Ms. Emily had been inside the Dunn house since Billy and June had lived there, before I was born. Josephine always stopped Ms. Emily on the back porch, the few times she'd tried.

I stiffened when we entered the back hall and went into Josephine's room. I looked at the place the way others might see it. Ms. Emily winced and put her hand over her nose and mouth. She said Josephine needed to see a doctor and went to the phone in the kitchen to call the Mental Health Department. The sheriff arrived not long afterward.

I sat on the screened porch, away from their shocked faces and comments about the condition of the house. In a way, I felt responsible. I eyed the cistern, tempted to join Remy at our favorite spot, but Ms. Emily had asked me to stay close where she could see me.

I wanted to be the ostrich, hiding my head and eyes, but it seemed I was invisible anyway. I hadn't expected all the attention from telling Ms. Emily Josephine was sad. In my mind, Josephine might get up and throw a fit because Ms. Emily was interfering—maybe get in her car and go to the bar. But, Josephine didn't move.

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She was committed to a hospital in San Antonio. The County Mental Health Officer made attempts to hospitalize her in Galveston, because it was closer, but there were no beds available. Ms. Emily agreed to look after me while Josephine was gone. The Sheriff had papers for my mother to sign authorizing a parental placement that gave Emily temporary custody of me.

A social worker came and sat beside me. She said until my mother was able to return home, I would be staying with Ms. Emily. A doctor showed up with a nurse, deputies arrived with papers for the sheriff, and someone arrived with chicken that we ate outside.

The Dunn house was a hive of activity. All the official people milled around with worried faces, calling to get paperwork delivered. The social worker roamed the kitchen and Josephine's room taking photos. The sheriff put my mother in the backseat of his car, into what looked like a cage. In a filthy nightgown, Josephine made a pitiful sight. Her shiny, wavy hair was knotted and dull.

The county vehicle rolled away from us down the gravel drive. I could see Josephine's head through the rear window. Watching her leave had been a little sad, but it was also exciting that I was with Ms. Emily. Seemed to me I had no worries.

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It was dark by the time everything was settled and Ms. Emily locked the Dunn house. She and I walked across the road to her place, and Remy followed. Ms. Emily scrambled eggs and made toast. She led me to the guestroom and showed me a chest with a drawer full of clothes in my size. She said she'd been collecting them for the times I came to visit. Looking at me, with tears in her eyes, she handed me a flowered nightgown. I held the gown to my nose and inhaled the scent of the drawer liner. Everything would be different at Ms. Emily's.

After we ate, I took a bath, put on the fresh ruffled gown, and found the bed turned down in the guestroom. Ms. Emily sat on the side of the bed and patted the mattress for me to crawl in, and then she held my hand. "Everything will be okay, sweetie. Josephine will be in a place where she can get the help she needs. I know you're tired. We'll talk more in the morning."

The days passed in a new calm. They seemed as rare and still as rolling waves sparkling in the Gulf in the summer. I liked the new routine at Ms. Emily's. She would give me clues when the plan would change. "Sabine, Mrs. Lawson and I would like to go to lunch after church today. You're invited," Ms. Emily said. "Lunch at a restaurant is a treat sometimes. We can order dessert and eat with a special spoon."

Sometimes she even asked my opinion. "I was thinking about getting a hair-cut tomorrow. Would you like me to pick

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you up from school? I'll be in town," Ms. Emily said, folding the sheets she unclipped from the clothesline. "We can stop by the grocery on the way home and pick up something for dinner."

Meals were regular, bath time and bed time were predictable. The crisp white sheets on the bed in her guest room felt good against my skin. Nothing had a more comforting texture than the tiny stitches in the quilt on the bed. Those stitches reminded me of John Lennon's words. I gave Josephine credit for giving his words to me.

My hair was brushed and styled every day before school and always clean. Remy had a pillow in the room where I slept and was fed and bathed regularly. He was as happy to be with Ms. Emily as I was. She allowed me to be in charge of Remy and bought a dog brush, so I could brush his fluffy hair. Remy sat perfectly still and looked at me with big thoughtful eyes while I groomed him. He smiled and said he was happy for me.

I rode with Ms. Emily to the Dawson farm, and Mrs. Dawson came to the car from her chicken coop. She was fine with Remy staying at Ms. Emily's "That damn dog just shows up to eat anyway. We never know where he is. Dale doesn't take care of him. I have to do all the work, and I don't even like dogs. Y'all just keep him." She had on the same house dress she'd worn when I hid behind the bushes in her yard. I didn't dare

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look past her. I don't know what I'd have done if I caught a glimpse of Dale.

Ms. Emily's cats didn't seem to mind. They had outside jobs, keeping the shed free of mice, so they left Remy alone and he ignored them.

Most Sundays I went to church with Ms. Emily, but I felt more spiritual sitting behind the cistern and communing with the bobcat. I never questioned why Ms. Emily went. Whatever she chose to do worked for her. The occasional covered-dish was always a treat.

However, I had to draw the line about Sunday school. Margaret Lawson, Ms. Emily's friend, had encouraged her to allow me to attend Sunday school at the First Baptist Church. I'd attended school for several years and was familiar with the rules of the classroom, but would often get up and walk out when the lesson was something I already knew. Emily was willing for me to give Sunday school a try.

On the day Mrs. Lawson was coming to pick me up, Ms. Emily braided my hair and said, "Now, Sabine, when we go into the sanctuary of the church, there will be a service and a plate will be passed for a collection. You have an opportunity to put some money in as an offering. Take this quarter, your money to contribute. Put it in your pocket, and keep the coin safe until it's time."

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I'd been proud to know Ms. Emily trusted me with the money. I slipped the quarter in my pocket and patted my thigh.

When I arrived at the classrooms with Mrs. Lawson, I met Laura Weber and her older brother, Stephen. They'd seemed nice, guiding me to a place at the round table. The teacher showed pictures of Jesus talking to all the little children about doing unto others. He was a handsome man. His face looked a little like Marvin's face.

The class went over a list of the Ten Commandments and all the "shalt nots," sang songs, ate snacks, recited verses, and got to play a little. It all made sense. There was no big news about how to live that I questioned.

During snack time Laura came and sat down beside me with her juice and cookies. I stood to brush cookie crumbs from my lap. The quarter Ms. Emily had trusted me with fell to the floor. Laura pounced on it and put it in her own pocket.

"That's my quarter for the collection plate," I said.

"Finders keepers." Laura smirked and then smiled. She put her hands on her hips, like she was the boss.

"Wait a minute," I protested a little louder. "Ms. Emily gave me that quarter, so I could put it in the collection plate. You can't just take it."

Laura's brother, Stephen, came over. "What's the problem?" Stephen asked, giving me a mean look.

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“I found a quarter on the ground,” Laura said. “Now Sabine says it’s hers.”

Stephen turned to me and said, “Prove it.”

“I can’t prove it. It fell out of my pocket, and I need it back to put in the collection plate.”

“Well, if you can’t prove it, then it’s not yours,” Stephen said.

“What?” The word caught in my throat. “I promise, that’s my quarter. What happened to ‘do unto others’ and ‘thou shalt not steal’ anyway?” My eyes shifted between Laura and her brother, both standing up now, smiling. At first, I thought it might be a joke, but they made no effort to return the quarter. “Finders keepers” must have trumped “do unto others.”

I sat by myself after that. When I met Ms. Emily later for church, I had to admit I no longer had the quarter. I also learned that Laura and Stephen were Margaret Lawson’s grandchildren and they sat behind us in the church, giggling.

When we got home, I told Ms. Emily Sunday school wasn’t for me. She didn’t question me dropping out. I told her they talked about parents coming to a program and I would be odd without a parent. My neat appearance and possession of the quarter for part of the day had been an inkling of what was required to be normal, but even Ms. Emily couldn’t conjure the other part. So, that was the end of Sunday school.

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I wanted to fly under the radar, with no recognition, thanks, or attention. The hoopla embarrassed me. Attention at school for my academic abilities was annoying. I became almost immobilized by the embarrassment, feeling as if there was an implication that other students were lacking, and I wanted no part in calling attention to another person's deficits. My own experience with negative attention had caused me to be overly sensitive to attention at all. And, besides, my friend Reggie Hawkins could've made perfect grades if someone would've allowed him to think. They should have an assembly to call attention to the teachers and let all the students throw tomatoes or something. Teachers weren't all bad, but I could have made ketchup on some of them.

Saturday afternoons, after working in the garden, Ms. Emily liked to sit at a small round table with three metal chairs and watch the birds. She'd often serve lunch there, pointing out a blue jay, or a cardinal, sometimes a kiskadee or bunting. One Saturday, we sat at the old wrought iron table in the corner of the yard, eating tuna salad sandwiches and watching Remy run from tree to tree, taunting squirrels. Maybe the squirrels taunted him—hard to tell. I told Ms. Emily about Laura taking the quarter at Sunday school over a month ago.

“Sabine, why didn't you tell me when it happened?” Emily asked.

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“I guess I didn’t think there was anything you could do about it. I know Mrs. Lawson is your friend, and I didn’t want to say anything bad about her grandchildren. I didn’t really understand about the collection anyway.”

“Sometimes, when something like that happens, you need to tell someone in authority so they can help you figure out what to do about it. Those children needed instruction at the time.”

Well, there you go. I knew there was a reason it sounded like a bad idea to tell. The *authority* would step in and screw everything up.

Ms. Emily wiped her hands on a napkin, then looked at me with serious eyes. “The quarter was no big deal. It’s just a token exercise to get you used to the practice of making an offering.”

“I was afraid I would be accused of tattling, ’cause I couldn’t prove anything,” I said. I couldn’t figure out why the church needed money, especially one quarter at a time. “Laura’s brother told me I couldn’t prove it was my quarter, so then I didn’t know what to do.”

“That’s why you let an adult know what’s going on.” Emily sighed. “They can be the one to decide how to proceed.” She cocked her head and gazed toward a row of dewberry bushes on the fence line. “This is what I know about other people’s intentions, Sabine; they are none of our business. The Universe will take care of that imbalance. You have no control over it.

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All you can control is you, and your reaction. You have to trust in everything coming back in alignment.”

I considered what Ms. Emily said, but I decided my experience with adults making decisions hadn't worked out so great. I wanted to be in control of what happened after telling authority. If I couldn't have that assurance, I didn't want to take the chance of the adult's making a decision I couldn't live with. If everything was going to realign in the Universe, it could happen without an adult knowing anything about it.

I watched Remy running back and forth under the trees with his head turned toward the sky, searching for the squirrel. Remy's life was simple. Dogs had it easy. They live in the moment, not thinking about a quarter dropped over a month ago.

Animals suffer consequences once, while humans carry the burden with them, chewing on it like a cow with her cud, judging themselves about their choices. I had a negative memory of Laura and Stephen based on that quarter, and I didn't know how to shake it. I could tolerate Dale Dawson better than I could those two on the campus of the church.

“Sabine, I see the wheels turning in your head,” Ms. Emily said. “Don't worry about not telling someone. It's done. The quarter went where it was supposed to go, regardless. Don't look so serious. We are all connected. You're not in this life alone, and the space between us is not really empty. It's full.”

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Ms. Emily held her arms out and up to the sky, as if I could see the fullness that surrounded us. I couldn't. And besides, the more people I met, the fewer I wanted to be connected to.

1982

Most days with Ms. Emily were easy and fun, but not all of them. One day, in the spring, when I got off the bus, I ran through the kitchen door and found Ms. Emily at the table, her shoulders slumped, and her eyes were sad.

She said, "Sit down, sweetie, I have some bad news." Her voice cracked, like she might cry.

My heart raced, and I got warm all over. My first thought was really a hope that Josephine wasn't coming back, but it was worse than that. Remy hadn't met me at the door.

Ms. Emily sat, wringing her hands and motioned to the chair on the other side of the table. She reached out and held her hand in front of me, asking for mine without a word. She squeezed, but gently and then said, "Sabine, Remy passed away today." Her eyes glistened and she swallowed hard after her voice cracked.

I stared at her, waiting for her to tell me the real truth. Maybe he was hurt, but still alive. If I saw him, he'd come to me and wag his tail.

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Emily inhaled a deep breath. “He was running down the road after you got on the bus and a truck came along. I’m sorry, sweetie. Remy’s gone.”

I felt the blow to my own body and slumped and went numb. My stomach churned like I might throw up. I wanted to jump up and search for him. Ms. Emily was wrong. It hadn’t been Remy.

“Jason Brown, my dearest friend, came by delivering the mail and helped me bury Remy in the backyard.” Emily sniffed and held a tissue to her nose. “Would you like to see his grave? I think we need to mark it with something special.”

I jerked my hand back. A grave? NO. I held my head with both hands, wanting to scream. She had to be wrong.

I stared ahead, not believing I’d never see Remy again, walking beside me, wagging his tail, or touching the back of my leg with his wet nose. Time passed, but I didn’t know how short or long it was since I’d walked into the house. I cried, a bawling, uncontrollable cry. “It’s not f-f-fair— that such a good d-dog..., like R-R-Remy should die, and...J-J-Josephine’s still alive, m-m-m-miserable in San Antonio.” My chest heaved with gasps as my heart pounded in my throat.

Emily moved beside me and held me, her arms around my shoulders. “I-I know, sweetie. It’s hard to believe and it’s okay to cry and be sad—even angry for a while. We buried him so

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you could remember his happy self, and he could have his dog bed wrapped around him forever.”

Emily’s heart pounded against my shoulder and her voice vibrated against my forehead, but the words meant nothing. All I wanted to hear was Remy’s nails on the kitchen floor and see him wagging his tail. I cried until the tears wouldn’t fall anymore. My nose ran into the tissue Ms. Emily handed me and my eyes stung with the salt in my tears.

We sat in silence as I held my palms against my cheeks trying to regain an even breath. When I did, Emily led me outside to visit the fresh grave. She said some sweet words about Remy and asked me if I wanted to say anything.

I said, “I’ll miss you *forever* Remy. You were the best dog I ever knew, and I love you always.” I spoke calmly for Ms. Emily, between the sniffs, but I was angry at God. Whoever he was, he let me down a bunch of times, but this was the worst.

Ms. Emily said those were good words for Remy’s memorial. As we walked back to the house, the sun filtered through the oaks onto the path. The birds chirped and settled. A plane droned in the distance. I asked myself how the world could continue to turn without Remy. Of course, what Ms. Emily told me had to be true. She was the one person I trusted. She said Remy was at peace. But how could that be with his body under the dirt?

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I remembered Remy's squinting eyes, wagging his tail, and the attitude he showed me. The cold nose, now touched me on my calf. It was reassuring that Remy was there on the path with me. He must have heard my doubts. And, I could still hear him in our special voices.

I mourned Remy for a long time. My grief wanted an answer, but there wasn't one. Remy was gone. But, I was comforted by the presence of his spirit. That would never leave.

There were distractions. Ms. Emily tried to involve me in activities to take my mind off the sadness and focus my thoughts. She showed me how to compost using orange peel, banana peel, coffee grounds, shredded paper, and other kitchen trash, like egg shells. She had a big bin in her backyard where she threw all this stuff, watered, and stirred it every once and a while. She suggested I do the same in the yard at the Dunn house, explaining we could build a compost pen. All I could think about was all the stuff that was dead and Remy. He went back into the earth and the earth had always been my protector. I accepted that part.

Ms. Emily said, "You can make a little garden over at the Dunn house, and you and Josephine can walk out and pick your supper." The thought of that appealed to me, making new life. Josephine wouldn't even notice a patch of dirt in the backyard.

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A small garden would be a big improvement in the weeds and rusted stuff.

There were two sheds in the back of the Dunn house. One was bigger for parking tractors and the other was full of tools. Ms. Emily and I searched the sheds preparing to start a garden. I found a rusty shovel, a pitchfork, and a hoe. We pulled the cobwebs off the splintery handles. A basket held garden gloves of every size. I picked the smallest to help me avoid getting wood splinters in my hands. When I pulled the gloves on, my hands tingled and I could hear Nadine's voice. I shrugged. Of course, I would choose her gloves. I marked a square in the dirt and we picked up the debris there. Ms. Emily tilled the soil with the old pitch fork and a hoe.

Each time I walked to the trash pile to drop something from the yard, I saw a shadow of Remy moving toward the pasture. I imagined him lifting his nose into the breeze, sniffing.

The overturned dirt sat a couple of days, and then I planted the seeds in rows Ms. Emily marked with the hoe. We didn't have a garden hose. I filled an old coffee can and made several trips from the faucet to water the seeds. It rained the following day. Ms. Emily celebrated, announcing the garden always responds better to rain water. She did a silly dance with her arms in the air. I only wished Remy was there to roll his eyes.

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She thinned her Dianthus and gave me flowering plants to line the bed. Ms. Emily said, “Every garden needs a little color.” The planted patch of tilled soil stood out in the neglected yard.

I was dog tired every night after working in the garden, but I still cried myself to sleep over losing Remy.

A few weeks later, we admired the patch of seedlings. Ms. Emily said, “You know, Josephine will be coming home one of these days, and you’ll move back over here to the Dunn place. We can get a room ready for you in the house, and get you off that musty mattress on the sun porch.”

Emily worked a hand spade through the soil and pulled weeds out by the roots. “You should be sleeping in a bed with sheets and have a place to call your own in that big house, a place to do your homework, a place to have a friend over, a place to relax and read, or whatever you want to do—your place, Sabine, off-limits for anyone else.” She dropped the weeds on the pages of a newspaper that she’d later fold for transport to the compost. “Think about the things you’d like in your room,” Emily said.

Without hesitation, I said, “Books, music, pretty fabrics, like some of the clothes you bring me, and animals, especially dogs, like Remy, a quilt, like the one in your guest bedroom. I have always liked the things I find outside, pieces of wood, dried wasp nests, feathers, and shells.

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“Okay,” Emily said, “Those are the special things we can collect. You are very observant, and you know what you like.” She smiled at me with crinkling eyes. “Some grown-ups don’t have such self-awareness.”

I was excited to think about making myself a space that would be a happier spot than the old mattress. I was old enough to graduate from that musty room to a nice bed, something more comfortable and private. I would turn ten next August and had been too tall for a long time to sleep on a crib mattress.

What will it be like when Josephine comes back? I made a promise to myself that I’d create a better place, no matter what Josephine thought. Ms. Emily would help me. Only problem I had was maybe she meant I should move upstairs. That would be a room far away from Josephine’s on the first floor, but that’s also where all the family spirits lived and the kids.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SABINE

1999 CHAMBERS COUNTY, Texas

SABINE WANDERED THROUGH the first floor rooms of the Dunn house recalling the interior before Marvin had left. The difference in the rooms before and after Josephine's last hospitalization was stunning. Josephine's old closet was empty except for a couple of bed pillows and a quilt on one of the shelves. The storage space seemed bigger than some houses. Now it was hollow, much like Sabine had imagined Josephine had been before she'd read her mother's journals.

Those diaries revealed that Josephine was anything but empty. She'd been full of chaos, spilling over with commotion. The only order she could divine was within the walls of her closet. Now, Sabine hung three outfits on the mostly empty rods.

The memories of playing in the closet returned. *Those were the best times, the times Josephine left me alone.* Sabine hadn't

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realized how rewarding it could be to clean and maintain the house until Josephine had been carted off by the sheriff. It should've been a sad sight to see her mother riding off in an official car. She'd breathed a sigh of relief.

Of course, if Emily hadn't been standing in the wings, ready to step in, Josephine's absence would have been much different. If it hadn't been for Emily, Sabine's childhood would have been a series of moves. Her defiance had rested just under the surface, ready to erupt at the slightest provocation. One cross word from an adult attempting to make her go by the rules and Sabine would have run away, possibly ending up exactly like Josephine.

"Emily was my saving grace," Sabine whispered to the three outfits on hangers. "There's no doubt about that." Sabine's words were swallowed by the empty closet. She closed the door behind her after stepping into the suite. It rivaled some of the most expensive rooms she had stayed in at the Biltmore or the Whitby. The space had an old world feel: antique furnishings, plush rugs, and opulent fabrics. Items from the attic belonging to Sabine's great grandmother had been dusted and moved to the room.

Sabine opened the garden door to the sun porch after picking up her book, which she'd yet to open. The ceiling fan began a slow spin after she flipped the switch. She sat on a wicker lounge, positioned exactly where her musty crib mattress had

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been, and kicked off her sandals, allowing her head to sink into the over-stuffed, down pillow upholstered in Barkcloth.

The pale blue ceiling of the enclosed porch brought back memories of painting the room. Emily's excitement about redoing the porch was dulled by Josephine's reception of the changes. Little did they know that nothing they did would change Josephine or their lives in her orbit. Sabine's mother had no room for change. Josephine clung to the vestiges of anything she could recognize. Now, Sabine had some understanding of Josephine and her reckless behavior. The world and her own family had scared her senseless. Maybe one day, Sabine could even forgive.

1982

On the first Saturday in May, Ms. Emily and I crossed the road with a wheelbarrow full of brooms, mops, dusters, and cleaning products. Our hair wrapped in scarves, we swayed and danced to the music from the LPs on the turntable in Josephine's room. We dusted the records and the phonograph but planned to save her room for last.

We started with the kitchen, collecting so many bags of trash I stopped counting at twenty. Ms. Emily scrubbed the porcelain sink, returning it to a vibrant, white shine. All clutter was thrown away or set to the side as I scrubbed all flat surfaces. Cupboards

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were emptied before Ms. Emily wiped them clean, and organized what was left in sparse, neat stacks. The pantry and refrigerator got the same treatment. Ms. Emily mopped the wide-plank, wood floor several times with a mixture of apple cider vinegar, bergamot oil, and warm water.

“How’s it looking out there?” Emily said as she cleaned the windows from the inside.

I stood on a step ladder in the screened porch, cleaning the outside of the windowpanes. “I have to go over them more than once, but they do get clean eventually. You’re right, this old newspaper works pretty good. But look.” I spread my fingers and presented Emily with my black palms.

“Don’t touch anything with those hands until you get a chance to wash them,” Emily said. “Maybe you should be wearing gloves.”

Emily finished the inside panes and crossed the kitchen to open the swinging door to the butler’s pantry, finding it locked. She went through the back hall to the front of the house, through the living room and dining room, and stopped on the other side of the butler’s pantry door. The metallic click of the latch being unfastened preceded the door’s swinging open.

As I stood on a small stool, holding my gray lathered hands under the sink faucet, Ms. Emily appeared in the doorway of the butler’s pantry, her forehead crinkled in a familiar confused

expression. Arms crossed at her waist, her eyes were vacant of their usual sparkle.

“What’s all this, Sabine?” Emily tilted her head toward the pantry, pointing to the tablecloths, magazines and paper towels on the floor. It wasn’t an accusatory question, more likely one of disbelief.

“That’s my hideaway for me and Remy for when Josephine has company so no one will bother me.”

Tears collected in Ms. Emily’s eyes. “You can always come to me. Don’t worry about waking me. I want you to.”

“We liked it in there. It was cozy, a special place, just for us.”

Ms. Emily shook her head, looking back at the little room. A rush of recognition traveled over me. I had created my version of Josephine’s messy bedroom in the butler’s pantry. Ms. Emily’s disappointment bothered me. She had no idea of the comfort I found there with Remy, and I had no idea how to explain it to her. She couldn’t possibly understand my need to sit in the soil behind the cistern either.

I helped gather the things that had made a bed for me and Remy. The butler’s pantry was my version of not letting adults decide where I would be safe. I fought the urge to buck her about the little room. If it was anyone else attempting to dismantle my safe haven, I would have fought them. But, I couldn’t argue with

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Ms. Emily. Now, I knew exactly how Josephine felt when she'd bared her teeth.

Josephine had failed me and herself. In nine more years I could decide my future. In the meantime, I trusted Ms. Emily.

She and I stood in the door between the back hall and kitchen, admiring our work. I had a glimpse of the family there before me, wispy specters of my grandparents. I saw my grandfather as a handsome, muscular boy, pacing the kitchen as he moved between the sink and stove. His expression was innocent but worried. He walked every room in an attempt to show me the tragedy of the Dunns, massaging the swollen knuckles of his crooked hands as he paced. He had thick golden hair styled in waves like a 1950s heartthrobs. It could be a long time before I understood the whole story Old Dan wanted to reveal, but I knew his hands were part of the tale. He showed me they'd been misshapen at a young age.

Emily and I had accomplished something. I could see it, smell it, and feel it. The surfaces had been altered, visually changed. The Dunn House had absorbed something, captured a phantom from the air and sucked it into the fibers of the furniture, the walls, and windows. I couldn't explain what had happened. However, I accepted that whatever had been there could ooze out again, even if Josephine was gone. The spirit of

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the house itself told me nothing good dwells in filth and shadows.

Although Ms. Emily and I were tired, the time had been well-spent. Layers of negative energy had been removed. We'd wiped away the nests for many of Old Dan's dark creatures and much of the residue that had been left there before him.

I stared at the walls and ceilings, wondering if Ms. Emily and I were going to be up for the challenge. Josephine had collected most of the filth in the Dunn house, but I had yet to meet the real queen of the clan, my great grandmother.

Ms. Emily said, "Now that's a good-looking kitchen Sabine. You can be proud to invite anyone in here. Look how much light comes through the windows now."

"Yes, and I can feel it. I never saw it look like this. I hope Josephine will help me keep it this way."

"Me too, Sabine, me too." There was doubt in Ms. Emily's whisper. "Let's take a break, and then we'll look at that room you've been sleeping in. Let's sit on the screened porch and have a snack. The weather's perfect for outside sitting."

A pleasant breeze blew across the porch on the sunny May day. I brushed the spider webs and dust from the chairs with a whisk broom. We took clean glasses from the kitchen and made a picnic. Ms. Emily wiped off the top of a small table and set

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out fruit and cheese and some crackers with peanut butter. She'd packed a little cooler with ice cold water and lemonade.

"We'll throw that dead plant away, Sabine," Emily said pointing to a pot with dried brown foliage as she sat on the cleaned chair. "We'll get one that's thick and green, maybe a fern or ivy. You know, ivy will root in a vase of water. Resilient."

I thought maybe I could do the same—reroot myself. I spread peanut butter on some crackers and topped them with slices of apple.

Emily's eyes scanned the backyard. "I can graft some limbs from my lemon trees and we can plant them right over there where you can see them from the porch. Nothing smells better than the breeze blowing over those blossoms. One of those lemons will have more juice than three store bought ones." She chewed, and her eyes danced with imagination of the new yard.

"Oh, yeah, and what about our mountain laurels." I reminded her. "Those smell good too. We need to find a spot for them."

"You're right. We can transplant them here too."

I wondered where Emily got her energy. She wasn't a young woman. She had graying brown hair, and leathery, sun-darkened skin that sagged under her chin a little. Sometimes she wore glasses when she needed to read, but most of the time they were pushed up on the top of her head, her hair springing in

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ringlets around the frames, or they hung from a chain around her neck. Now they were on her head.

Baggy jeans and oversized shirts were her favorite outfits. Some of the shirts may have belonged to her dead husband. Occasionally, if she was going to church, she would put on a dress, but not often.

Josephine didn't have a quarter of Emily's energy. I'd never seen Josephine stand up for more than a few minutes at a time. She was always leaning on something, propping herself up, depending on something else to hold her erect. I never heard Josephine say anything about making our house better, or helping anyone else.

“How old are you Ms. Emily?” I asked.

She smiled. “I'm exactly the same age as your grandmother, Nadine, would be. We had some good times when we were friends in high school. We went to dances. Daniel was her boyfriend back then. He was a great dancer and Nadine was generous, allowing him to twirl all the girls around the hall. Those were the best days.”

We ate in silence after she hadn't really answered my question. I liked to hear her remembering the best days. My best days were when I saw wild animals. I thought about the bobcat and wondered if the cat watched us from a distance. I sent him a message letting him know Remy was gone.

Phyllis H. Moore

There were lives in the woods noticing the things happening around the Dunn house. They knew the spirits in the house long before I was born and before Josephine too. They waited for something.

I supposed human memories could be rewritten, changed to be more acceptable. Maybe that's what's wrong with the Dunns, too many lies and secrets. Someone was whispering to me—telling me things I'd never considered.

I didn't have the answer. I only knew the souls in the woods would have more respect for humans if they didn't lie. That's what the spirits in the woods told me as I sat on the porch with Emily, paying attention to the quiet. Those elementals knew the land before the Dunn house was built. They knew the spirit of the person who built the house and they knew why it was built. It would take more than a thorough cleaning to gain the respect of the woods. Those souls could burn this place down if they wanted to. But they wouldn't.

A car pulled into the drive and parked next to the tool shed while I daydreamed about the elements. Ms. Emily squinted, staring at the vehicle. No one got out, so she stood, wiped her hands on her shirt, and walked out to talk with the driver. I wondered if it was one of Josephine's friends, but still listened to the spirits in the woods, as I was lulled by their honest

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whispers. Was I lost in the murmurs or *my* imagination? Were the people in the car part of the low voices?

The driver turned in the driveway and headed back toward the road as Ms. Emily approached the porch, and then the car was gone.

I forced myself to pay attention to what she said when I asked, “Who was that?” My voice sounded groggy. “I didn’t recognize the car. I don’t think they’ve ever been here before.” I felt as if I’d had a nap.

“He didn’t offer his name. He was looking for Josephine.” Ms. Emily cleared her throat and turned her head from side to side, her eyes scanning the yard. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, Sabine, to tell people Josephine’s in the hospital. We’re close enough to keep an eye on the house, but some people might try to take advantage.” She sat in the chair where she’d been eating. “I don’t want you to worry about it, but keep your business to yourself, okay?”

“Sure, not many people say anything to me.” To lighten the mood, I told Ms. Emily about one time when I was at Longmire’s Market. Mr. Longmire asked, “Who’s Josephine seeing nowadays?” I suspect most people were curious about my mother and Wendall Weems. I’d answered, “She’s seeing everyone she looks at.” I giggled at my own joke. Ms. Emily smiled and shook her head.

Phyllis H. Moore

I liked giving people I considered busybodies a nonsense answer. Sometimes when a teacher would ask me how Josephine was doing, I'd say, "She's doing as well as can be expected, according to the doctors. She should be able to cook, dance, and speak Spanish when she gets home. Josephine says it's better than going off to college." I delivered these words with a straight face and soulful eyes. My sarcasm was not endearing. I knew that for sure from the faces that stared back at me. However, I thought these people pumping me for information deserved my pranks.

Josephine was certainly not perfect, but she was mine. I'd heard enough gossip sitting in the school office to know people didn't keep things to themselves. Josephine would call them "assholes."

Emily stood, stretching her back and said, "Okay, girlie, up and at 'em." She put her hand on the top of my head and said, "I really don't want you to worry about anything. While you're with me, I want you to learn how to take care of yourself, but also to be a kid and have fun. Remember when you have an intuition about something, anything, mind that feeling. Tell yourself to be aware, like just now with that car pulling in here." She glanced toward the shed where the car had been parked. "There may be nothing to it. He was a very nice-looking young man, but I didn't recognize him, and he seemed a little nervous."

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Being careful made sense. I was on alert anytime a car pulled into the driveway. Ms. Emily had no idea. The Dunn House was set back from the road, and the county road curved around before the driveway reached it. She would be horrified if she'd actually seen some of the characters who showed up on our doorstep.

I much preferred sitting outside behind the cistern where they couldn't see me. And, besides that, I had just communed with the woods, thousands of souls much more important to me than anything human. In a way, they'd warned me about liars.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sabine

1999

REMEMBERING THE DAY she and Emily cleaned the sun porch made Sabine smile. The day she recalled best was actually the second time they'd tackled the porch. It seemed like yesterday when they'd headed across the road with buckets of cleaners and towels to scrub and paint.

Emily had done most of the work while Sabine sat with a little dog and read Josephine's diaries. It had been the second cleansing of the Dunn place, the one after Josephine was gone for good, the one that peeled back the wounds.

The revival of the porch took on a symbolic renewal, as Sabine had read about the trauma causing Josephine's odd behaviors. She'd never been a mother, not emotionally, and the words she'd written were evidence that she never could've been. The family history, embedded in Josephine's past, gave Sabine

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chills and often caused her to wipe her eyes as the words blurred on the page.

The most revealing part of the journals was Josephine had been a caring person until her teen years. She'd grown a callus, like the fingertips of accomplished guitarists, as her soul had responded to repeated trauma. The hardening had grown in Josephine, and she'd allowed it as an armor. Sabine wanted to blame her mother, but when she recalled the stories in the journals, she couldn't.

Now, as an adult, she sat on the wicker lounger, taking in the porch. She remembered Josephine had never sat there. She'd drawn the draperies in her room and avoided the light, furnishings, and photos that Sabine and Emily had positioned with care for Josephine to appreciate. It had been too late for her mother to lower her shield and accept a new reality. The house was foreign, a place unrecognizable to her toughened soul. She rejected the change, just as Sabine had wanted to fight Ms. Emily about dismantling the safe haven in the butler's pantry.

Sabine still resented, that during her childhood, Josephine was absent, even when they were in the same room. However, after reading her mother's journals, Sabine could understand why it had happened and conjured an anger at her grandparents and great grandparents for perpetuating the dysfunction. *It stopped with me and June and Billy. At least I think it did.*

Phyllis H. Moore

Sabine often wondered if this could be true. She held her breath sometimes, waiting.

1982

Everything on my mattress porch was thrown away. Ms. Emily was a big believer in recycling, but she couldn't identify anything in that pitiful little room to be salvaged or reused. I agreed with her. Except for the mattress and blanket, I didn't know what else had been in the room.

We rolled the mattress and tied it with rope, bagged up everything else, and stacked all the bags and mattress out near the shed. I looked away from Ms. Emily when I saw the stains under the old blanket, embarrassed by the condition of the bed I'd slept on every night. It was damp and moldy. There was an odor about it suggesting urine and drool, unwashed hair, filth. I pushed the thought away because the condition of my bed made me sick to my stomach.

The difference between my bed at the Dunn place and Ms. Emily's guestroom was beyond extreme. She didn't comment. I decided to raise the standard for myself. I would no longer accept that old mattress. Ms. Emily said she would find someone to haul everything to the county dump.

After the room had been emptied, we swept, and Ms. Emily cleaned the old wood floor with apple cider vinegar mixed with

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warm water. The windows were wiped clean until they sparkled. Ten, multi-paned windows lined three outside walls. I hadn't noticed the view before because there were piles of junk stacked in front of them. The windows were long, reaching from the wooden floor to the exposed beams in the ceiling.

With everything moved out, the room was bright and spacious. The light-filled area had a pleasant, open feel, promising to be appealing on a sunny or rainy day because of the view. My eyes had to travel over the untidy yard, but the tree line and pasture created a peaceful landscape.

Emily stood in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips. "Since there's an entrance to Josephine's room, the interior door right there, this might be a good place for some chairs for her to sit and relax and enjoy the garden, the woods, and field." She looked toward the wooded area behind the sheds. "Some comfortable furniture out here, maybe a daybed, would make this a lovely place to sit and read or watch the birds, or enjoy a good rain. Can't you just hear the drops pattering on that copper roof, Sabine?"

I agreed the view would be appealing, but I had doubts that Josephine would enjoy anything so pleasant. I thought my mother might fill the room with her derelict friends. My secret wish lingered, that Josephine wouldn't come home. I couldn't say any of this aloud to Ms. Emily.

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“You know Ms. Emily, I’m sorry I said what I did, the day Remy died, about Josephine still being alive and miserable. I feel bad now.” I lied.

Ms. Emily stopped mopping and put one hand on her hip and bit her lower lip before she said, “Sabine, I never gave that a second thought. I knew losing Remy was going to tear you up. Anger is part of grief and loss. Everyone goes through it, and each individual’s a little different. You, my dear, have been through more than a person could bear. I had no doubt your grief was speaking. I would forgive you anything.” She pushed a stray strand of hair under my scarf.

“I love you Ms. Emily. You understand me.”

Emily smiled. “I love you too Sabine. You make my life better every day.”

It was not only the first time I’d said those words to Ms. Emily, but the first time I’d said them to anyone. That day, in that room, with her, I felt confident. No matter what happened when Josephine came home, I could control *my* life. Ms. Emily was giving me the skills and the love to do it.

As the Beatles played in the background, Emily danced with the mop and I danced with the broom around the old mattress room. When the music stopped, Emily said, “Well it’s been a good day here, Sabine. I think we have done enough for now.”

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“Yes ma’am,” I said with a smile. “I’m renaming the room the sun porch. Let’s see if we can find an old western movie and take a nap in the air conditioning.” I relished the air conditioning in Ms. Emily’s house.

The Dunn place had been stagnant with musty air, moist, hot and unmoving. It was hard to get used to the lack of air conditioning after enjoying Ms. Emily’s house with central air. I thought about Josephine, probably watching television in a cool hospital room. Again, my thoughts swirled with comparisons.

Sometimes, I wondered how Josephine kept up with the news and current events. For a while I couldn’t figure out how she had known that John Lennon had been killed. There was no television at the Dunn place, and the radio was never on for news. During Josephine’s long confinement before Emily called the Sheriff, I discovered Josephine watches television while sitting at Buck’s or any other bar she frequents.

If Josephine had enough vodka, she would answer my questions without thinking. I considered the liquid a truth serum. If I could catch Josephine at just the right state of drunkenness, she would tell me anything I wanted to know.

However, I had to edit Josephine’s responses. In answering about how she knew John Lennon had been killed, Josephine let out a long string of explanation: “It was on the f-ing news

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Sabine. I saw the breaking news banner running across the f-ing screen on the f-ing television. Buck was just standing there, behind the bar, like an f-ing idiot, talking over the f-ing commentator and I had to ask him to turn up the f-ing volume. He's so f-ing stupid sometimes. Those f-ing people sitting at that f-ing bar didn't even act like they f-ing cared John Lennon was killed. Jesus f-ing Christ it was John f-ing Lennon ... f-ing Ono and them . . . You don't f-ing care, Sabine. Why are you asking me?"

Josephine's head had drooped and she'd closed her f-ing eyes and drifted off for a minute, then she'd be f-ing back and I would hear the whole f-ing thing again. Sometimes, I had to laugh at her and myself, even if it was hysterical laughter.

Before we went back across the road, Emily looked for Josephine's car keys and moved the car into the tractor barn. We turned on the porch lights, a lamp in Marvin's old room, and left.

As we walked across the road, I said, "If people don't see the car, won't they think no one is here?" However, I'd never thought about it before when I was alone in the house and Josephine was gone.

Emily said, "We should take precautions to make the property look tended. The lights and us coming over each day will let most people know."

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It was a little unsettling to think that someone might take advantage of Josephine being gone. Anyone who knew the house was haunted shouldn't want to venture inside. Those ghosts had power and didn't intend to share anything with outsiders.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sabine

1982

SUNDAY, MS. EMILY didn't want to start another cleaning project because we had plans to go to church and lunch with her friend, Mrs. Lawson. Ms. Emily hadn't attended church since I'd told her I was done with Sunday school a few months ago. The outing was supposed to be a reward for our hard work.

I put on my nicest outfit, a pair of sandals and a shift covered with bright flowers, intending to make the best of the experience. When we entered the church, organ music played while people drifted in to take their seats.

The music was sad, not something to lift a person's spirits. I'd call it *loud and poudy*. Mr. J. Miles Hanover's name was on a large brass plaque on the altar. Ms. Emily said he'd donated the organ. My head throbbed, something that hadn't ever happened before. A cool sweat covered my neck. I was sure the

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Presbyterians down the street could hear the pounding. It echoed in my head.

There were a few people in the congregation I recognized from school, teachers and students. I waved to one of the girls a few pews ahead who'd turned to look at me. Becky Winslow, turned back without waving.

Four men stood, two on either side of the back pew. They waited to pass the collection plate. Two of the men had been to the Dunn place to drink and smoke marijuana with Josephine, but I didn't mention that to Ms. Emily. They stood straight, in their dark suits with their heads held high, serious, avoiding eye contact with me. I knew they'd seen me in church with Ms. Emily, but they never said hello. I stared at them, daring them to glance at me. The night Remy chased Ray, both men had been in Josephine's room.

One of the men, Wendell Weems, ran his finger around his collar as if it were tight. He knew very well who I was. In fact, he was in our home frequently. Did he consider I could grow up and talk about him? Maybe he thought I was as crazy as Josephine.

Later, I asked Ms. Emily, about the men who passed the plate. I knew Wendell, but I wanted to find out who the other guy was. She said one of them was the District Attorney, Wendell Weems, and the other was Edwin Myer, the president

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of the bank where Ms. Emily did business. She added they were highly respected in the community. I wondered if respected meant you could look away when you'd been bad.

We went to lunch at a local family eatery where many townspeople ate after church. Mrs. Lawson followed us in her own car. According to her, the restaurant was packed with Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians. Ms. Emily said the Catholics went to the cafeteria down the road. The Episcopalians must have gone to church and restaurants in Galveston.

Dishes clattered, people chattered, children screeched, utensils squeaked on plates, chairs scraped the floor. Nausea crawled over me, and I swayed. I closed my eyes and begged for the feeling to go away.

We were shown to a booth. I pressed my hands onto the cool plastic covering of the seat as I slid to the inside with a foggy awareness that Ms. Emily slid in behind me. The cool plastic was a comfort to my increasing nausea. I needed a break from the heat and confusion, like water on my forehead or an icy breeze.

Mrs. Lawson attempted to make conversation across the table about school, but I couldn't focus on her words. Ribbons of chatter swirled, and I heard Ms. Emily say, "I am so proud of Sabine. She is being skipped up to the sixth grade this year. She

makes all As and doesn't even need help with her homework. She took a test and placed at the 6th grade level."

"That's wonderful, sweetie," Mrs. Lawson said, turning her painted face to me, her red lips fluttering to reveal an uneven row of gray teeth. Her sickening sweet talcum powder scent wafted toward me. "Tell me who your friends are. I might know some of them." The red lips flattened in an uneven line, as Mrs. Lawson waited for a response.

"My friend, Reggie Hawkins, he, uh, moved out of town—a long time ago," I said, swallowing in an effort to shake the sick feeling bubbling toward my mouth.

Mrs. Lawson gave Emily a sideways peek and the lips scrunched into an oval surrounded by crevices. "Reggie Hawkins, I remember the Hawkinses. Reggie was a little different, wasn't he?" One of her eyes squinted as if accusing me of something.

"He was my best friend," I insisted, looking away. My voice rang far away, almost outside myself, as it had when I'd spoken earlier to order fried chicken with macaroni and cheese.

The conversation and red lips were part of my nausea as the feeling spread to my head. I wanted to pinch my nostrils against the sweet powder scent. The noises, tangled with dizziness, throbbed in my temples, the memory of the poudy music of the

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organ keeping time in my head. I could barely choke down a small amount of the food I'd managed to order.

I pushed the plate away trying to get rid of the sight and odor. Sweating and clammy, I wiped my forehead.

Out the big window, the sun reflected from a car windshield, burning my eyes and blinding me when I looked back at the plate of food. Blank spots blocked my vision. The reflection of the car window was a reminder of the extreme heat outside. My body stung from head to toe at the thought of the heat. When I looked up, Ms. Emily and Mrs. Lawson were both staring back at me.

"Are you okay, Sabine?" Ms. Emily asked. "Mrs. Lawson asked you a question."

"I don't know," I whispered. "I feel kind of funny. I'm not really uh . . . hungry anymore."

"Well, we can leave right now," Ms. Emily said. "We don't need to stay if you're not feeling well. I'll just get the check and we'll go. You surely understand, don't you Margaret? Sabine is ill, and I need to get her home. I'm sorry to rush off like this, but I don't want Sabine to sit here if she's not feeling well." Emily opened her purse and put money on the table.

Mrs. Lawson looked at me and said, "She looks fine to me, Emily. Give her a minute and it might pass." Her face was distorted, the thin, red lips moving in slow motion.

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“No, Margaret,” Ms. Emily insisted. “If Sabine says she doesn’t feel well, I know she doesn’t, because she never complains about anything. I can’t even remember the last time I heard her complain.” Ms. Emily waved to the waitress and asked for the check. I was ready to flee, relieved Ms. Emily was willing to leave.

“Emily, you have spoiled that girl rotten,” said Mrs. Lawson. “She quit Sunday school, and now she’s ruining our nice lunch. You need to face the fact that she manipulates you.”

My head swam, so heavy it could fall over onto the table. Ms. Emily and Mrs. Lawson talked in echoes in the distance. Voices ricocheted, arguing about me, but I couldn’t make out all the words. I put my hand to my face as the sweat beaded on my forehead. Stray hairs, loosened from my ponytail, stuck to my cheeks. Ms. Emily said, “Sabine, you have gone pale. Come on, honey. Can you walk okay?”

Mrs. Lawson said, “Of course she can walk, Emily. She’s not even...”

My mouth filled with sour saliva, and I threw up on the table. Retching repeatedly, I lost everything I’d eaten since I woke up that morning. Chunks of food were coming out of my mouth and bitter chunks were stuck in my nose. It was disgusting, but I felt so bad, and the relief of getting it out was so immediate. I wasn’t thinking about how much those witnessing me must be

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disgusted also. Mrs. Lawson squealed, and Ms. Emily had her hand on my forehead saying, “It’s okay Sabine. It’s going to be okay.”

I could only see the already-eaten food, swirling on my plate with the uneaten food I couldn’t stomach. My eyelashes were damp. I wasn’t sure if I should try to wipe my mouth or my eyes, or crawl under the table.

After I vomited, my head cleared, and I could comprehend what was going on around me. Waitresses scurried, trying to get someone to clean up the mess. Ms. Emily walked with me, her arm clutched around my shoulder. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but this poor child...” I tried to turn my head from her, not wanting to get vomit on her nice Sunday dress.

She ushered me into the car and hurried around the hood to jump in and start the engine. I thought about leaving Mrs. Lawson at a table full of puke, and then I pushed the thought aside. I should’ve stayed to help the waitresses clean up the mess, but I couldn’t face the embarrassment of returning to the restaurant. I put my head back and surrendered. The whole scene couldn’t be fixed.

“Sabine, honey, I am so sorry,” Ms. Emily apologized. “Don’t worry about what’s happened.” She adjusted the air conditioning vents to blow cool air on my face. “Things like that happen. We’re going to get you home and into bed, so you can

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rest. A cold cola might make your stomach feel better. Just try to relax until we get home.” The cool air felt good at first and then my teeth started chattering.

When we arrived at Ms. Emily’s, she stripped my clothing off and put me in the bathtub, washing me and dressing me in fresh pajamas. She suggested I brush my teeth then tucked me into bed.

She was patient, holding my hair back when I had to throw up three more times. She put a wet cloth on my head, on my neck, and said soothing things to me while the nausea attacked me before the retch. I knelt staring at the shiny, white toilet bowl. I couldn’t recall Josephine ever comforting me like that. However, I couldn’t recall being sick either.

Exhausted and drained, I fell asleep and slept the rest of the afternoon, evening, and all night long. When I woke the next morning, the nausea was gone, leaving me groggy and weak. Ms. Emily peeked around the bedroom door. “How are you feeling Sabine?”

“I feel much better. I don’t think I’m going to throw up anymore.”

“Must have been the twenty-four-hour bug,” Emily said. “He’s gone now, and you’re back to normal. I’ll fix you some toast and tea. Does that sound like something your stomach can handle?”

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“Yes. Toast sounds good.”

“Okay, coming right up. Sabine, don’t worry about putting clothes on. I called you in sick for school today. Your teacher is supposed to let me know what you need to do to catch up. You’re probably several days ahead of everyone else anyway. Actually, we know you’re at least a year ahead.”

“I have never missed a day of school.”

“Well, it’s allowed when you’re feeling puny.” Emily walked down the hall toward the kitchen, muttering to herself, “I know they give awards for perfect attendance, but that just encourages children to go to school sick.”

Emily put a plate of toast in front of me and sat down on the other side of the table with a cup of coffee. We both wore robes.

“Mrs. Lawson called to check on you. She was worried. At first she didn’t think you were really sick.”

I grinned. “I guess I showed her.”

Emily laughed. “Oh, Sabine. I think Margaret means well, but she doesn’t always show compassion.”

Mrs. Lawson had asked me if I had friends, and I only mentioned Reggie, now gone. The woman’s voice vibrated through my head. I’d heard her tell Ms. Emily she thought I was spoiled.

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The friend question must have bothered Ms. Emily a little, because she asked me later in the morning if there were any girls in my class I'd like to invite over for an end-of-school sleepover.

“Nooooooo. There is no one that I want to be around but you, Ms. Emily.” She'd tried to coax a little, but I was determined. I did not want a sleepover.

I hid the invitations to any party I'd received. There were only a few. I didn't want to go anywhere. I preferred to be with Ms. Emily. Most girls at school teased me about my clothes, our bedraggled house and overgrown yard, and Josephine's being gone. I couldn't wait to leave school to get away from them.

We had an afternoon chat with Josephine on the telephone because we'd missed the Sunday afternoon phone call she usually made. Ms. Emily explained that I had a bug and was in bed all day but was back to my old self.

We could have ridden the bus to San Antonio for a personal visit, but Josephine didn't want us to, and Emily and I were relieved not to make that trip both ways for just a short stay. Truth was, I didn't care if I saw Josephine or not. I really didn't care to talk with her on the telephone either. I did it for Ms. Emily and because it was expected. It took an effort because Josephine dulled my spirit, wore it down like the lead on a number two pencil. I didn't dare sharpen it, shiny and pointed,

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likely to get broken off at the first pressure. No, I couldn't take the risk.

After my part of the phone conversation, Ms. Emily stayed on the line a little while. When she hung up, she asked me to sit and talk with her. "Sabine, good news, the doctors believe that Josephine will be released to come home before school starts at the end of August, just after your birthday. They've given her a prescription for medication that she will need to take every day. Josephine will be responsible for doing that. You don't have to worry about it.

"We can talk more over the summer and make a plan for when you can come over and spend time with me, but I think you will be back at the Dunn place by September, full-time. We will have a great summer getting ready for Josephine to come home." Her eyes crinkled at the prospect of accomplishing our plans.

This wasn't good news. Good news would have been Josephine had decided to stay in the hospital forever. However, Ms. Emily seemed to have a plan for the summer so I would try to make the best of it. I thought about writing Josephine a letter to tell her she really didn't need to come home if she didn't want to. But, I thought it was better not to put anything in writing.

Emily loved to go to garage sales, especially if she had a project. "You know Sabine, until we get upstairs and look at

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what furniture is up there, we don't know what you will need for your room, but I can be looking for fabric, pillows, throws, etc.”

Ms. Emily seemed excited about putting a room together. I was looking forward to it, also. Anything would be an upgrade from the musty mattress I was used to.

While Ms. Emily made plans for my new room, I rode the bus to and from school every day, counting down the last few weeks of school. Plowed fields ran beside the bus like long legs of some tall centipede. I watched for rabbits and squirrels at each stop. Life outside moved across the reflection of my face, in the smudged glass.

The daily routines of the places we passed became familiar. Mr. Winslow checked his cattle at the same time every morning before going to his job at the courthouse, some mornings pushing bales of hay from the back of his truck. Chickens and guineas roamed at the side of the road in front of the Dawsons's. The birds would sometimes straggle onto the road, and the bus would have to wait while they strutted and mumbled, trying to get to one side or the other. I grinned, knowing the guineas thought the big yellow bus was the intruder.

The boys, sitting behind me on the bus, teased. They said curse words and laughed, calling Josephine names and waiting for my reaction. I pulled my sweater up over my head to keep

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their slimy, paper spit wads from clinging to my hair. Between those rude boys, Marvin, and Josephine, I knew every curse word ever invented.

The girls at school behaved worse than the boys. At least the boys were playful. The girls stood in clusters, giggling, looking over their shoulders, and rolling their eyes. They saved seats in the cafeteria and the library, but not for me. Sometimes I would be approached by a girl, on a dare, to ask me about Josephine. I would go to class late and be sent to the office for a tardy slip, a trade-off, worth the relief of not being with my peers between classes. Their meanness stole my sarcasm.

I insulated myself by focusing on my schoolwork and the projects with Ms. Emily.

Every day after school, we looked through the mail order catalogs, and I pointed to the colors I liked. We talked about how furniture was situated in the pictures. There was one room that showed a little bed for a dog that was exactly like the person's bed. I wished Remy could've had a bed like that.

Sometimes, I would imagine I could hear Remy's nails tapping on the wood floor in the hall. The rhythm was so familiar, it would carry on for a while until I remembered my friend was gone. When I looked, there was nothing there.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sabine

1999

JOSEPHINE'S OLD BEDROOM was a pleasant suite now, with access to the sun porch, offering a view of the garden and pastures beyond. Sabine rested on the wicker lounger, her book opened and faced down on her chest. She hadn't read one word since sitting. Gazing over the pastures made her want to go upstairs and check out the view she remembered from her own room, the one she and Emily had decorated. Memories of their voices and laughter dangled in the air.

Sabine gravitated to the bottom of the stairs, recalling the days she would have sworn her heart had stopped. The stairway curved to the second floor in a graceful sweep of steps and white balustrades, topped with a wide, rounded oak rail. The black and white marble squares in the front foyer still gleamed despite the life-changing events played out there.

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Stepping over the tiles where Sabine had examined the pool of blood, she placed her foot firmly on the stair runner, grasping the oak rail and bounding up the stairs as if to escape the vision.

The game table in the upstairs foyer, where they'd played cards, board games and chatted, still sat surrounded by four chairs. Doors to the suites stood open, allowing light to pour into the wide hall. Tall, walk-through windows to the balcony, once covered with heavy draperies, were now bare except for the outside shutters closed in front of them, the slats tilted to allow lines of filtered light inside.

Mullioned windows across the back of Sabine's old room were visible through an open door. She stepped inside. The scent of furniture polish and lavender drawer paper lingered. Quilts on the iron bed were different, but the view was exactly the same. As a young girl, she'd watched storm clouds approach from the west and relished the rain and lightning, even the rumblings.

Daisy's jeep pulled up on the back drive, and Sabine left her old room to return to the first floor. She met Daisy in the back hall. "You left your cell phone at our house," Daisy said, waving the phone at Sabine. "Dale heard it ringing. It was on the console in the front hall. June's looking for you."

"Again? She called the phone here, and I talked to her," Sabine said.

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“No, this was a little earlier. I hung around until the calf was born to make sure we didn’t need the vet.”

“Oh, great. So everything’s okay?”

“Yes. Mama and baby are perfect. We can breathe a sigh of relief,” Daisy glanced past Sabine. “You finding everything okay?”

“Yeah. I went upstairs to look at my old room, feeling nostalgic.”

“You came down from the third floor?”

“No, my first bedroom, on the second floor, the one Emily and I decorated when I was about nine, while Josephine was in the hospital. I haven’t made it to the third floor yet.” There was a chronology to her reunion with the house. The structure was a character from her past, a personality that had changed over her lifetime, responding to those people who sought shelter there.

“That’s my favorite,” Daisy said. “I guess it’s because of the work Dale did in those rooms.” Sabine smiled. Dale was fortunate to have Daisy. He had grown way past his nickname, Booger.

“Those rooms are my favorite too. That was a teenager’s dream, to be up there away from everyone, above the trees with a view of my horses at the stable. I loved it up there. Thanks for bringing my phone. You and Dale want to go out for pizza tonight, my treat? I have some things I want to run past you.”

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“Sure. Sounds good. We’ll pick you up.” Daisy started for the back door, her ponytail swinging.

“Hey, tell Dale to change his shirt. I don’t want to look at that wet, palpation sleeve while I’m eating.” Sabine still liked to give him a hard time.

Daisy gave Sabine a thumb up. Don’t worry. He’s already taken a shower and changed shirts.”

Sabine still clutched the phone. She entered Josephine’s room and put it in her purse so she wouldn’t misplace it again.

She crossed the hall, walked out the back door, across the porch, through the garden to the tack room where there were two rocking chairs on the wooden porch. A feral cat lurked, slinking behind the building. Sabine sat in one of the rockers and gazed to the second-story windows of her childhood room, recalling the day she and Emily committed to the redo.

1982

“Hello Sunshine, get your homework done and then I’ll show you what I found at the garage sales today,” Emily had said when Sabine arrived off the bus from school on Friday. “We’re going to have fun this weekend fixing up your room.”

Emily wore a pink and white checked shirt with a long shirt tail hanging over faded jeans. Her cowlick was more pronounced in the humidity and gave her a youthful forehead

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with curls hanging down over one eye. She still had a messenger bag slung across her body, holding money for her treasures and clippings from the newspaper, listing the addresses and times for the sales she'd planned to attend. She slipped the bag off over her head, setting it on the kitchen counter while she went through the mail she held in her hand.

I sat at the kitchen table, where a glass of milk and a plate with two chocolate chip cookies waited. I finished the math problems, wrote a three-page book report on *A Wrinkle in Time*, outlined a history chapter, and put spelling words in alphabetical order. I was done by 5:00 p.m.

I followed Ms. Emily to the storage shed, where she'd cleared the way for us to amble through the piles and look at her purchases. "Jason was putting mail in the box as I got home and he helped me unload my car," Emily said. "He's due a pound cake for all he's done for me lately. Did I ever tell you about Jason and me sharing lunches every day before I retired from the post office? Pound cake was his favorite."

She'd purchased two gallons of paint from a lady who'd changed her mind about the color she wanted to paint her living room. "I love this color," I said. "It reminds me of a robin's egg. These quilts are nice. They look good with this blue color."

"I got those from the same lady," Emily said. "The corners are damaged, and there are some tattered places. I've looked

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them over pretty good, and I can work between those spots and make pillows, cushions and a throw. What I like about them is the colors and how soft they are.” Emily ran her fingers over the stitched fabric. “I never took up quilting, but I admire the detail and all the steps it took to make this with left over materials. Vintage linens are all the rage in the decorating magazines. I think these were a nice find.”

I liked the details Ms. Emily noticed such as texture. “This has positive energy.” I ran my hands over the quilt, squeezing the tufted fabric between my fingers. I pulled it to my face and sniffed the fragrance. “Hmm. I love the smell of an old linen cabinet, soap, old wood, and clean sheets.”

Emily picked up a crate full of odds and ends, explaining it was part of a deal she’d made. “Sabine, I bought this whole crate and everything in it for three dollars. I am more excited about this than anything. Don’t you just love a good garage sale find?” The crate held photo frames, ceramic vases, china plates, and various embroidered linens.

I agreed the items were special, but the best part was how tickled Ms. Emily was about them. Josephine never seemed to notice details or comment on anything that gave her pleasure.

People are different and have their own interests, but the only thing Josephine could get excited about was music, and she hardly ever really did anything about it. She could have played

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the piano more, or gone to concerts, or taken classes, but she didn't. She listened to the Beatles albums over and over and stayed in her room, doing the same thing, making herself smaller, limiting herself. Her fate was to shrink instead of grow.

I couldn't understand why Josephine refused to know a new thing, lowering herself to such a small space. I felt Remy's nose on the back of my leg, my signal these thoughts couldn't accomplish anything.

"What are you thinking about Sabine?" Emily wondered aloud.

She caught me off guard, but I said, "Oh, I was just thinking how lucky I am to have you looking out for me while Josephine is gone and how we're going to make such a nice room with all of these things. I wouldn't have been able to think about going back to the Dunn place to that musty old mattress, and you're teaching me things I can use."

Emily patted my shoulder and moved on to her next purchase.

"Now, here's the best part, Sabine," she said, as she pulled a large roll of what looked like carpet, from its resting place in the corner. "This was left over from someone's wall to wall carpet project. Jason helped me measure it out, and it's about twelve feet by twelve feet. Look at the pattern." She smiled as she bent down and pulled back a corner to reveal a beautiful

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-muted floral pattern on a light, gray-blue background. “The lady figured no one would want a patterned carpet, and I pretended she was probably right, but it would help cushion my old feet.” Emily’s voice lowered to whisper as she smiled. “So, she sold it to me for ten dollars.”

Ms. Emily hooted and held both arms up in the air and did a victory dance. I danced, too, and whooped and hollered. “And on top of that, her son had his truck there and offered to deliver it for me. His friend helped get it here and unloaded. It was my lucky day.”

“I’ll pay you back one of these days Ms. Emily, I promise.”

“Now wait just a minute, Sabine.” Her smile disappeared. “You will do nothing of the kind.” Emily became serious and grabbed me by the shoulders. “Josephine pays some support for you, and it is plenty to have you here in my home, more than enough to provide you with food, shelter, and clothing. I would have you here without any support, Sabine. That was all the judge’s idea in the temporary order. These things we can do for you are things you deserved a long time ago. There will be no payback or talk of payback. Money is not a thing for you to worry about.”

“Okay, if you say so,” I said, causing me to wonder where Josephine got money. I had never seen Josephine go anywhere to do work and get paid. She always had money to pay for

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manicures, new clothes, cigarettes, and alcohol. The local car dealership called her when their new models were in every year. Telephone, gas, and electricity bills were probably expensive for a large house, obvious because they'd been turned off from time to time. She didn't buy many groceries or cleaning products, but still she needed money from somewhere. I planned to pay more attention.

We headed to the Dunn place with a wheelbarrow full of garage sale finds. I helped Emily stack all the treasures in the back hall. She had been to the house during the week while I was in school and had cleaned the main hall and other downstairs rooms. The banister and stairs had been polished. There was no longer litter and trash on the floor. Everything was spotless.

The newly-cleaned beveled glass in the front door and sidelights allowed light to stream in and a view of the large oak that the front drive circled. I gawked as I approached what looked like a new door, rubbed to a satin patina with oil soap.

Marvin's old room and the living room had been cleaned also. The blinds were open. The windows had been washed and lifted, allowing the southeast breeze an entrance to the house. The sills had been brushed free of dust and cobwebs. A stack of linens, laundered and folded, sat at the end of the bare mattress.

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Ms. Emily followed me into the room and patted the fresh sheets. “I didn’t remake the bed in case we decide to move it out of here.”

We heard footsteps upstairs, boots and heavy trudging. Emily glanced at the ceiling. My eyes drifted upward also, as if we could see something if we looked there. “I’ve been hearing this stomping all week,” she said. “Dan’s not happy about this cleaning, I suppose.”

“Old Dan’s never happy about anything, Ms. Emily. He’s always stomping around about something. I’m used to it.”

“Well, I’ve been talking to him, telling him we’re cleaning whether he likes it or not,” Emily said. “He’ll either have to find himself a dark, dusty corner in the attic or hit the road.”

I lifted my eyes again. “Oh, he’ll hide. He won’t leave here until he tells me everything.” Somehow, I knew my grandfather was on a mission. He couldn’t get Josephine to listen, but he had my attention.

“You must’ve worked here every day while I was at school. It looks so different. The house has a nice feel to it now. I like it.” I ran my hand over the top of a chest next to the bed, admiring the work Emily had done. “You got so much work done,” I said. “You did all of this and kept your house tended too.”

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“Sabine, I enjoyed every minute of it. I like having a project, and I get a feeling of accomplishment from cleaning. This was definitely a project, but it is also a clean slate with so many possibilities. Don’t you think it’s fun?”

“Yes, I do.” I picked up a leather box on the bureau and opened the lid. It was empty. “It doesn’t seem like work. It’s kinda like playing house, huh.”

“It is.” Emily giggled. “You’re exactly right. Playing house. We’ll have to have a tea party when we’re done.”

The living room was spotless, and the only piece of furniture in the room was the freshly polished piano, repositioned in front of the wall of windows. Bookshelves had been reorganized and cleaned. Nadine’s glass collection sat arranged and dusted. The windows and floors were spotless. Multi-paned windows covered the front wall, filling the room with the light formerly blocked by the tattered draperies.

Emily said, “I laundered those curtains, some of them are in good shape, and some of them fell apart, but most of the fabric is salvageable. I have them all folded and bagged in my storeroom. I’ll bring them over when we decide whether we can reuse the fabric somewhere. It was expensive when it was new. It’s called damask, and it would make beautiful pillows or curtains.”

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The tall windows, forming a bay in the dining room, were bare. The long lace curtains had been taken down. The room filled with light, making the dining table shine.

Josephine would notice the draperies had been removed because she liked darkness. But, would she see the piano had been rolled to a new spot? Would she be angry with Ms. Emily? Of course those things had to be moved to do a proper cleaning, but would Josephine feel it was too much? She always complained that people were in her business.

“Are you ready to go upstairs?” Emily looked at me with raised brows.

“Okay, might as well,” I said, chuckling. It was a nervous giggle, verging on hysteria, because I was scared to death to go up the stairs. Besides Old Dan, I knew there were others there, but I told myself I could do it if Emily was there with me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sabine

1999

WHEN SABINE WAS in New York, Josephine seldom dominated her thoughts, which was one of the reasons she enjoyed the city. However, at the ranch, memories bubbled up with little warning, and Sabine would break into a sweat thinking about the trauma in her mother's life, trauma and dysfunction. *I always worried I'd be like her, but I don't think I am. I allowed Ms. Emily to help. Josephine always pushed her away.*

In the old days, Sabine had stalked Josephine, trying to figure out the mystery behind her behavior. The girl eavesdropped as she drew pictures at the card table in the foyer. Now that she knew all of Josephine's secrets, everything made sense, but it was too late for her mother. Anyone would have

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taken up Josephine's cause as a child, but she had created another entity, a poltergeist of sorts. She was one of the phantoms, even when she was alive.

Sabine relaxed on the porch of the tack room, seated in one of two rockers. She closed her eyes to the southeast breeze that coursed across the coastal plain from the Gulf of Mexico, less than ten miles away as the crow flies. She missed the contented nickers. The scent of worn leather, saddles and bridles, wafted in the air along with the horse sweat that lingered on the curry combs and boar's hair bristles. The bucket she'd used to tote her grooming supplies to the stalls still hung from a peg next to the window.

Dale would have gladly loaded a trailer and brought her a spirited mare for long morning rides, but that would have done her in. She might never leave. Her therapist had warned her she needed people also. *Why?*

A barn cat scampered under the fence and into the pasture. Sabine was sure it was a relative of her old friend, Pippi. She hadn't been able to dress that kitten in doll clothes as her nieces would have dressed their pet kittens. Dunn ranch felines had been too wild, but she enjoyed them anyway. She'd watched them from a distance, less prissy than her nieces' kittens. Sabine's rowdy cats had survivor's attitudes. *That's what I have*

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too. But, I don't always have my claws and fangs ready to strike. No, that would be Josephine.

Everything had been unruly in the days of her childhood, Sabine's hair, the cats, the unkempt yard, and Josephine. Sabine could tolerate the wildness, even revel in the nature of it, unless it was malicious. The meanness that had inhabited the Dunn house was unacceptable. The upper stories of the house had been feral, uncharted territory in Sabine's childish mind. She had to steel herself to be able to climb the stairs to the second floor, the space all *living* Dunns had abandoned.

Sabine's fingers thumped on the cover of the book on her lap. She still hadn't glanced at the pages. The novel was something to grasp, an object to hold on to and ground herself. It anchored her the way she'd sought to steady Reggie Hawkins, the only best friend she'd ever known besides Millie.

Memories of Josephine and Old Dan flooded Sabine's thoughts. Recollections of the day she'd breached the second floor whispered to Sabine she could be brave.

1982

As Emily and I climbed the stairs, I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to the second floor, if ever. When I got to the top, I glanced around to get my bearings, but I'd never seen the foyer before. I'd carried Josephine's fear with me. The feeling

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had been there for a long time, a tingling on the back of my neck, maybe for my whole life.

Ms. Emily eased by me at the top of the stairs and looked in the doorways of each room. She crossed the hall toward the front of the house where there were floor-to-ceiling windows that opened onto the second story balcony. I was frozen, clinging to the stair rail.

Exterior shutters closed over the windows and latched from the inside. The only light, squeezing into the room in narrow shafts, were glimmering little lines on the wooden floor. Emily raised the windows and opened the shutters. The latches squealed with the effort. A southeast breeze came rushing through, as if it were in cahoots with the light trying to get inside. The gusts caused the long lace curtains to billow and blew Ms. Emily's hair back from her face. I squinted against the brightness.

Ms. Emily paced on the balcony and said, "I've never been up here. Good heavens, Sabine, this is the most pleasant covered porch. You can really feel the Gulf winds, and look how far you can see down the road, over some of the treetops."

She paused and turned to me, looking back towards her and still standing at the top of the stairs. Old Dan was there with us, pacing, fretting about how to reclaim the stagnant darkness. He rubbed his misshapen hands, enraged at the loss of his power.

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He was insulted that two females could gain control and change his kingdom. I could hear him as easily as I could hear Remy. Exhausted by the effort to ward off the feelings, I absorbed them. He'd been so easy to access, but also draining.

“What are you doing, Sabine,” Emily asked.

“Old Dan's here.” I couldn't make myself move.

“Come on now. He can't hurt you. Don't let him get to you. You're much stronger than that, and you're his family.” Emily had motioned for me to join her on the balcony. Could she understand I felt no loyalty to a Dunn?

I released the banister. “He doesn't like you letting in the light and air,” I said, as I walked, without the need to stoop, through the tall windows and onto the porch, catching a whiff of mildew from the sashes. “He says you should close the shutters and forget about trying to open the second floor.” The wind stroked my face as it rustled through the oak canopies surrounding the house. A few leaves had settled in the corners, but other than that, the peeling painted floorboards on the porch were bare.

“Do you know how to visualize, Sabine?” Emily asked as she wandered, glancing up to the tops of the exterior windows.

I approached the railing and gazed over to the front yard. The stately oak's canopy reached above me. “I'm not sure. I see things other people don't see.”

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“You have a gift, I know. Your grandmother, Nadine, did also. I’m talking about using your mind to see things the way you would like them to be. If I say *cowboy boots*, can you see them in your mind?” Emily asked.

“Yes.”

“What color are they?”

“Black with turquoise stitching, like Josephine’s favorites,” I said, wondering why Ms. Emily talked about cowboy boots.

“Those are yours. No one can ever take them away from you. They’re in your head,” she said, lifting her face to the breeze. “You can decide what’s in your head. Use your breath to get to your imagination by breathing in the positive and exhaling the negative. You can control your thoughts.” She paced at the end of the porch, glancing at the open windows as if Old Dan eavesdropped.

“Practice standing up to Old Dan. He can’t dictate what will go on in this house.” The breeze danced through Ms. Emily’s hair and lifted her shirttail. Her cheeks rounded as she smiled. “He doesn’t get to tell you or me not to open a window, and that’s that.”

“How—how do you know this?” I said.

“Nadine and I helped each other. When you deal with spirits you have to use your wits. You and Nadine are the wittiest people I’ve ever known.”

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I imagined Ms. Emily and Nadine sitting in the kitchen over coffee. Ms. Emily had told me she couldn't see ghosts, including her dead husband, Mr. Railey. However, she accepted that I could.

I'd only told her what he said, not anything about his appearance. When he showed himself to me, he'd appeared just after the tractor accident, gashes in his head with his exposed jaw all the way back to his ear and his torn shoulder drooping over his bloody plaid shirt and overalls. His zombie appearance was for me to recognize who he was, not to scare me, because he just wanted Ms. Emily to know how proud he was of her.

"Sabine. I think it's time you know this," Ms. Emily said, as she walked over to the far end of the balcony. "Yes, you're young, but your intellect is keener than most adults I know. Sometimes you just need to know a little history. See where the road makes the first bend to the right, where that big oak is?"

She waited to continue until I was beside her. "In 1973, on a rainy afternoon the school bus was late, and I went outside to look down that way. I had a gnawing feeling in my gut. All I could see was black smoke."

Emily crossed her arms and continued to stare to the north. "Shortly, I heard the sirens. I got in my car and headed down there." She stopped and wiped her brow.

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“I won’t ever forget the sight. There were kids being ushered to the fence line, firemen and EMS people running around in the rain. The bus had skidded off the road and landed on its side.”

Her voice cracked as if she was experiencing the scene again. “Your brother, Billy, and sister, June, were on that bus. I had to breathe deep and keep my wits about me. The emergency responders wouldn’t let anyone near. Others wandered, looking for their kids too. The officials told us to stay out of their way. I came here to wait with Josephine.

“She was home alone with the twins, downstairs as usual. Those babies were about two, almost three years old then. I told her the deputies promised they would get in touch.” Emily stared down the road. “I couldn’t make her sit. She was agitated.

“I busied myself, picking up around the kitchen. I knew people would be coming. Finally, after a long while, the deputy drove up with Billy and June in the backseat. My heart soared when I saw their little heads in the car window. They were shaken and had some cuts and bruises.”

“Poor Billy and June must have been scared.” I stared toward the road trying to imagine the way it was when Ms. Emily was looking for the school bus.

Emily’s gaze turned to me. “It was a freak accident on a slick road and the only time in the school’s history that’s ever happened. Josephine fell to her knees on the back porch and

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cried and hugged herself. The sheriff's deputy helped me get Billy and June out of the car and inside. She had to get back to the scene and help get the least injured children to their homes. We stepped around Josephine, ignoring her crumpled body on the porch. Before the deputy left, she told me there were five dead including the bus driver." Emily's fingers shook as they covered her mouth.

"I moved in slow motion, not knowing how to process what I'd been told. Surely, I was in shock." Ms. Emily rubbed her upper arms and shook her head. "I have prickly stings all over me now just talking about it.

"I took Billy and June into the kitchen and got towels to dry them. Josephine got up from the porch and went and crawled into bed. I guess we all deal with extreme stress in different ways." Emily cleared her throat. "But, I admit, I didn't handle Josephine's reaction very well. I bit my tongue, but I resented her for a long time.

"I couldn't find antiseptic or bandages. I searched the kitchen but couldn't find anything to feed the kids. I ran home and got some chicken pot pies from my freezer and heated them before returning. I left Billy and June sitting at the kitchen table. They seemed to be in shock. June promised me they would stay there until I could get back."

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The rambling, seemed to be Ms. Emily's way of trying not to cry. She must have thought twice about leaving Billy, June, and the twins to go back to her house for food.

"The kids were worried about getting to school the next day. I decided they would probably be better off in the classroom than home with Josephine in her condition." Emily licked her lips and blew air in a steady stream.

Their burden had probably been more than mine because they had two little sisters, but I understood the kids not wanting to stay home. I'd had the same feelings many times with Josephine, the reason I had a perfect attendance record. I also had always felt safer on the bus than I did with Josephine's driving.

Emily continued to tell me about what had happened after the accident. "I bathed the kids, the twins too, and I cleaned and doctored their wounds. I fed them and read them stories. I sat in a chair and slept off and on, and was here to take them to school the next morning. When I got back to the house, the twins were up and wandering, but Josephine was still in bed.

"I stayed and fed the girls breakfast and waited for Josephine to rouse herself. She assured me she could tend to them and was feeling better. It was nearly 10:30 in the morning when she finally woke. I asked her if I could show her some tips about stocking the kitchen, but she became angry, furious. She cursed

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me, accusing me of meddling in her business. So, I left some groceries I'd brought and backed off, not wanting to anger her so much she wouldn't let me check on the kids.

“Everyone, in time, worked themselves back into their routine, but Josephine had a big setback. It wasn't long until a report was made to Child Protective Services by someone at the school. That rattled Josephine, and she sent all the kids away, probably the best for everyone. The twins were being neglected and, after the bus tragedy, I realized Josephine would just crater under stress. She asked for help in finding the little girls an adoptive home. I think Wendell Weems made the arrangements.”

Emily's shoulders and arms dropped as she continued to stare down the road. She inhaled and closed her eyes. “William came and got June and Billy and took them to Longview. I met him briefly and he seemed to be a nice man, genuinely interested in his kids. They wrote me little notes for a while, and then they stopped.

“Josephine had located William. Wasn't hard. He was living in the house he'd inherited from his parents and had the same phone number. Billy and June were a little shocked about the whole thing, but they were also pleased to be able to meet their father. I hated to see them go, but I couldn't predict what the alternative would have been if they'd stayed.”

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Emily rubbed her face and then looked into my eyes. “Sabine, Josephine is who she is, and you don’t have a thing to do with it. The children you see and hear in this house are souls from that bus accident so long ago. I suspect you know what I’m talking about.” She raised her brows.

I had no idea Ms. Emily might know there were children in the Dunn house. She was right, and I had wondered where those child souls came from. They’d dodged my questions.

“Yes, I know what you’re talking about,” I said. “How can we help them? Isn’t there some way they can go to heaven or wherever they need to go?”

“Let’s get this place in order. We can cleanse and make it healthier for you also.”

All the cleaning had a purpose. I should have known. Ms. Emily says Josephine sent all her children away. I wonder why she never tried to send me away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MS. EMILY AND I walked through all four bedrooms upstairs in the Dunn house, inspecting the furniture. Personal items left behind were strewn on the tops of chests: hairbrushes, mirrors, hairpins, books, fishing lures, odds and ends from someone's daily life.

Old Dan followed us, but hung in the corner shadows. His heavy shoes made no sounds because his feet didn't touch the floor. I wanted to spend more time studying the personal items, figuring it all out, but we had a task to do, and it didn't seem fair to Ms. Emily to shillyshally.

All the rooms had furniture, linens, rugs, and lamps. None of these things had been dusted or cared for in many years. Huge beds of dark, carved wood sat in each room. Two of them had high carved posts on each corner with dusty fabric draped over them. They looked like the beds of queens in some of the picture

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books Ms. Emily brought from the resale shop. Heavy chests of drawers and dressers topped with veined marble still held clothing. I opened drawers to find woolen socks, flannel shirts, and underwear.

A fifth bedroom at the top of the kitchen stairs had been the room where the help lived, according to Ms. Emily. She said Cecil and Elizabeth Dunn, my great grandparents, sometimes had a cook and a lady who cleaned.

“I suppose this is where Teeney lived with her daughter when she was here,” Emily said. “I always wondered where she stayed. She wasn’t here very long, but this would be the room she slept in. She used to help my mother with canning. Teeney’s little girl was just about the cutest thing I’d ever seen.”

The furnishings in that bedroom were my favorite, because they were not as heavy and dark. No personal items had been left behind there.

Three twin beds and a double bed lined the windowed wall. The beds had wrought iron headboards with curlicues that made them look playful. Mattresses of ticking stripe were covered with loose, flat sheets. Simple chests of drawers and a plain painted dresser with a long mirror in the center sat along the bead-board wall opposite the beds.

Ms. Emily said the wicker rocking chairs around an oval oak table were probably where the women sat to do mending and

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quilting. In one corner, there was an oak desk with a ladder-back chair. A floor lamp curved over the desktop. Two matching goose-necked lamps with green glass shades sat unplugged on the dressers. These furnishings were my favorite.

A large basket, standing about three feet, filled a back corner on the floor. A woven lid with leather hinges and a leather tie closure hid the inside. A diamond design woven into the front and two wide leather handles on each side were the only decorations on the weaving. I opened the top to find the inside full of scraps of material, mostly plaid and solid flannels, cut in perfect squares and folded in neat stacks. “Look at this Ms. Emily.”

“Oh, my, I bet those were someone’s quilting quarters, saving old shirts with worn out elbows for scraps to be sewn into a soft, warm quilt.” Emily lifted a stack of fat quarters and fanned through them. “Just think, Sabine, those may have been Old Dan’s or Ethan’s flannel shirts, or maybe even Cecil’s, their father’s. The colors are nice, aren’t they? Masculine, is what comes to my mind when I see all these handsome hues.”

“I could smell the men, as Ms. Emily fanned the fabrics, a mixture of aftershave, perspiration, whiskey and musk. “I like the basket,” I said. “I like the feel of the weave and the leather. I wonder what this was meant for?”

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“Storage, I imagine, Sabine.” She replaced the folded squares and closed the lid. “I agree, it’s a lovely accessory. Maybe you could use it for dirty laundry in your bathroom or closet.”

“Hmm. I like the simple furniture the best,” I said, standing at the door to the back stairs.

“I’m partial to it also. Those bedsteads can be painted and look good as new,” Emily said with her hands on her hips. “We can wax and clean the wooden furniture, give it a nice finish.”

I chose the rear bedroom, with the bay full of windows overlooking the back yard. I liked it because there were lots of windows facing west, and I thought of sunsets. I would have a view of the drive also.

In the interior of a big cedar lined, walk-in closet was the door to a bathroom. The closet still smelled of the fragrant wood, and was large enough to be a dressing room.

“This bedroom is about fourteen by sixteen feet,” Emily said, after we exited the closet. “The rug will work just fine, unless you see one you like better in one of the other rooms?”

“Oh, no, I like the flower rug. It looks so good with the paint color.”

“Me too. It will look lovely in here. I can’t wait to see the room painted. Our first task will be to get all the furniture that’s in here moved out.” Ms. Emily tugged on the heavy drapery and

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a flurry of dust shone in front of the window. “We’ll take these down and expand the view.”

I didn’t know how we could manage moving furniture. What I did know was my stomach growled, loud enough for Ms. Emily to hear.

“Sounds like we need to get back to some supper. I’m hungry, too, and the sun’s going down. Look at the pasture and the wildflowers, Sabine. You’re going to like this room.” We back-tracked through the house, closing windows turning lights off, except the porch lights, and we headed across the road, taking the empty wheelbarrow with us.

I had learned something about my siblings. Emily’s confidence in me and my own ability to step into the mysterious second floor gave me faith. *I’m not Josephine*. But what would it be like to sleep up there alone with Josephine covering her head downstairs?

When we entered Ms. Emily’s back door, the aroma of supper hit me. A chicken noodle concoction simmered in the slow-cooker on Ms. Emily’s kitchen counter. She prepared a green salad while I set the table and poured glasses of milk. Emily had been teaching me how to cook simple meals in her small kitchen while instructing me on kitchen safety.

My thoughts during dinner drifted as Ms. Emily talked about my new bedroom. It was true, I was ahead of my class in

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school, and I was learning things from Ms. Emily that other girls my age might not know, but it didn't make me fit. I wasn't like anyone else, and I didn't have a friend. *What good does it do to be smart and able to cook if you don't have friends?*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sabine

1999

SABINE DOZED IN a rocking chair on the tack room porch, startled awake by a rumble of thunder. She rubbed her forehead and stared at the dormered roof of the Dunn house, recalling the rain pinging on the metal. The copper eyebrows over the panes resembled a frown. When she'd been in high school and stirring up the ghosts, she'd stared at the upper floors from the stables long enough to see her great grandmother, Elizabeth LeDoux Dunn, peering from an upstairs window.

The woman would materialize to show Sabine her prolonged and gruesome death. However, in mustering the energy to make the complaint, Elizabeth had exposed her own grisly character. Sabine's great grandmother had unwittingly revealed her role in creating the Dunn legacy, nothing to be proud of. However, Sabine had always believed that unleashing

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the truth was the only way to adequately cleanse the mansion and free the Dunn descendants from the curse of their ancestors.

The latest reincarnation of the house had been a collaboration between Emily and Sabine with some creative inspiration from Dale. They'd fashioned a private suite of rooms for Sabine and June, a place for them to get away from guests on the lower floors, an attic respite. It was those rooms where Sabine bonded with her sister and plotted June's marriage to her handsome husband, Dr. Eric Shelton. However, it was also Elizabeth Dunn's haunt. There had been no love lost between her and her sons, especially, Daniel.

Sabine recalled sitting in the empty attic with an old trunk, sifting through photos and reading old letters and journals with her best friend, Millie. Sabine had called Millie's mother on the way to Texas and invited herself to a Friday night crab boil. She'd felt as close to Mr. and Mrs. Collins as she did to Ms. Emily. Millie was in California on a business trip, still single, even though she'd fantasized about marriage as a teen.

The odors of the nearby stables sparked a memory of the family trip to purchase horses. Emily had packed a picnic, and they'd made a side trip to the campus of Lamar University. The little things Ms. Emily had orchestrated to encourage positive memories of Josephine hadn't escaped Sabine. Not only did Ms. Emily nourish Sabine with food and provide shelter, but her

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guardian had gone to great lengths to assure that Josephine's children would have a few positive memories of their beautiful mother. Emily had a way of encouraging them to appreciate their mother's creativity and talent, no matter how brief their own glimpses of such things had been.

Sabine never witnessed Josephine venture past the first floor of the house. Her mother wouldn't recognize her home now, even though as a teenager Josephine had occupied a room on the second floor. Sabine only knew this from reading Josephine's journals and imagining her mother in that room. However, somehow, in the writings, the girl Sabine read about, was not the same woman who'd closed herself up in the suite across the hall from the kitchen.

Josephine's room on the second floor had been abandoned. There was nothing from her childhood remaining when Sabine and Ms. Emily had toured the bedroom. The only remnants Sabine had been able to find were photos in a locked jewelry box that had belonged to Josephine's mother, Nadine. The journals had been the key to unlocking why someone, Old Dan, had erased Josephine from the Dunn House. He'd attempted to expunge every female who'd ever inhabited the place, but he'd failed.

Teenaged Josephine had not been afraid of anything. She was full of spirit, "a spitfire," Ms. Emily had said.

Phyllis H. Moore

1982

Emily

Emily calculated ways to get Sabine invested in cleaning the Dunn house. Sabine even asked questions, seeming to make mental notes, as if she'd need all the information to steel herself for her mother's homecoming. Although Emily was frequently impressed by Sabine's maturity and insight, she worried that whatever mental illness had plagued Josephine could be inherited by her children.

What had happened to Josephine's other children after all these years? Emily didn't have a clue. During their tour of the Dunn house, Sabine had gazed at the opulent furnishings. She'd questioned how the Dunn family had employed live-in servants. Emily had avoided the questions, changing the subject. Sabine had no idea the financial clout and tarnished reputation the Dunns had carried and still did.

The girl was smart enough to inquire, but Emily had no intention of adding to her burden with the sordid history of her ancestors. *Besides, all I know is what others gossiped about. I can't verify any of those stories, and I lived right across the road all these years.*

Sabine

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1982

Before we went to bed, Ms. Emily gathered all the tools needed for the next day, putting them in the wheelbarrow. I'd laughed when Emily clapped her hands and said, "I feel just like a kid on Christmas Eve. This is exciting, and I can't wait to see the room finished."

Ms. Emily's enthusiasm was contagious. Joy oozed from her and attached itself to me. That feeling always terrified me because the thrill could leave as easily as it came. Sometimes, I practiced a crisis, imagining what might happen next. I didn't *want* to be weak, in body or spirit and kept thinking about how we could possibly move furniture. For some reason, Ms. Emily wasn't worried. I didn't want to dampen her spirits, so I didn't mention it.

Ms. Emily had been distracted when we were roaming the Dunn house. She knew something and wasn't telling me. When we had been in the room at the top of the kitchen stairs, she'd been quiet until I pointed out the big basket. She's kept secrets. Sometimes I wanted to stomp my foot and yell, like Josephine, when I suspected people weren't being honest. I can't talk about that frustrated feeling with Ms. Emily. I need her. At school, they send kids away for letting out their frustrations. I don't think Ms. Emily would do that, but—I wish I had Remy. He'd understand.

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I couldn't fall asleep. Tossing and turning, I sought the cool spot on the pillow, the magic spot that would help me drift off. I breathed deep and counted my breaths.

I dreamed: I wore a long, flowing, white dress. My braided hair trailed down my back with white flowers entwined, beautiful. A little terrier dog, like Remy, ran with me through a field of bluebonnets. In the dream it wasn't Remy, or maybe it was, a younger version of him. I sang, skipping, and running, as the field went on forever. Billowy white clouds, like curtains, were all around.

When I stopped, I saw a tall man. He had dark hair and a wide smile. His legs were long, and his gait was smooth and relaxed as he waved and said, "I've been looking all over for you." When he finally got close enough for me to touch him, I woke. My heart pounded, and my nightgown was drenched in sweat.

I'd had dreams before that eventually had come true, usually a few days after the vision. I predicted Marvin's exit and my friend, Reggie Hawkins, moving out of town. The man's voice was familiar. He sounded like the man who'd helped me learn to read, the man who backed into the shadows.

I got up to get a drink of water, trying to decipher the symbols in my dream. The field of bluebonnets might be my new room at the Dunn place, and the little dog would be the dog

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Remy had said would come to me, but I couldn't figure out who the tall man was.

Maybe Marvin would come back. I hoped not. Marvin was handsome, but he didn't have a wide grin. I didn't know what Marvin would've looked like if he'd smiled. He could only mess everything up. I'd never seen him approach me in a calm way. He stomped around in his boots and certainly hadn't helped me learn to read.

After getting back into bed, I took a book, *White Fang*, from the bedside table, and read until I fell asleep. When I woke in the morning, the book was on my chest, and the bedside lamp was still on.

Ms. Emily knocked on the door and peered through the crack as she eased it open. "Look at you already up and reading this morning."

I played along with her and jumped out of bed and said, "Just waiting on you!"

Emily braided my hair. We tied bandanas over our heads. Dressed in old clothes for painting, we had a big breakfast of eggs, bacon and fruit with toast. "We'll eat heavy for breakfast and have a light picnic lunch." Ms. Emily packed apples, cheese, pasta salad and some chocolate chip cookies.

After we cleaned the kitchen, we headed out the back door to add our picnic bag to the wheelbarrow and crossed the road

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to begin work. I liked the walk. I'd done it daily. In the back of my mind, I still worried about moving the furniture. I peeked at Ms. Emily, wondering what secrets she kept from me.

I'd never seen Josephine clean house or cook. The only time we'd tried to do laundry, she'd become irritated and had thrown things around. The old ringer washer on the porch was rusted and leaked. It was hard to imagine my mother in a clean and organized house. The Dunn house could change, but would Josephine?

When we rounded the drive to approach the back door, the positive feeling I had about the day disappeared. I got a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. Something was wrong. Emily parked the wheelbarrow, fumbling for the keys to the house. When we walked into the back hall, where the garage sale things had been stacked with care, the items were strewn over the wooden floor. Nothing was damaged, but it was as if someone scattered the piles on purpose.

"Old Dan," I said.

"Sabine, I believe you're right. We'll have to cleanse this house sooner than I'd planned. There's nothing wrong with that. We can manage."

Emily helped me pick up the quilts. We carried them to the clothesline, where we pinned them to the wires in the sunshine. I handed Emily the clothes pins while she attached the quilts and

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draperies she'd laundered. "Don't go back in the house, Sabine." Emily said. "Stay out here and dance around these fabrics. Sing the happiest songs you know. Set your intention on getting rid of any negativity. You and the sunshine are going to unleash positive. I'm going to run home and get some sage and rosemary. We're going to smudge the whole house before we start working."

I didn't take my eyes off Emily until she was out of sight, then I started skipping and singing around the clothes line. I ran between the quilts and draperies, lost in my song and dance, watching the shadows ripple and swirl. I sang Beatles' songs, sometimes slowing to twirl between the furls of fabric, making myself dizzy. I thought about my dream of bluebonnets and the tall man.

A dark red car pulled into the drive.

I stopped in my tracks and watched the driver, a tall man with dark hair, get out of the car and walk toward me. He had a wide smile and a slow smooth swagger. His silhouette approached me as the sun poured around him. I could only make out the outline of broad shoulders, muscular arms, and a thin waist as he came closer. He wore jeans and a plaid short-sleeve shirt, unbuttoned over a white t-shirt. He waved and grinned. He'd been the man in my dream.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

STRUGGLING TO SWALLOW, I gaped at the young man and couldn't make myself return the wave. His smile was warm, but I remembered Ms. Emily's caution about telling people my business. When he got close enough for me to hear him, he said "You must be Sabine. Is Josephine here?"

My heart pounded. It was the same car that had arrived the day Ms. Emily and I sat on the back porch eating. The same day Emily talked about taking precautions. I didn't want to answer any questions. This man seemed friendly. He didn't look like the people Josephine would hang around with.

"Who might you be?" I said, surprising myself and screwing up the question. I planned to stall until Emily returned.

His smile widened, exposing perfect teeth, and he cocked his head, then he said, "Look at you, all grown up. I know you

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don't have any reason to remember me, but I'm Billy. Josephine is my mom, and you might be my sister."

I couldn't believe the words or open my mouth to speak. I stepped closer to get a better look, shielding my eyes from the sun. He had the same twinkling green eyes and perfectly arched brows as Josephine. I'd always wanted a handsome brother. I wanted to hug him around his waist, about where my shoulder would be, but it might be best to shake hands first.

I held my hand out and said, "Yes, I am Sabine Nadine Cole, and I am happy to meet you, Billy."

He laughed, but I didn't think it was all that funny. I was relieved when Ms. Emily walked up the drive. Her pace hurried when she must have spotted us in conversation. Emily glanced at the car where a tall Black man filled the passenger seat. Ms. Emily approached the car, and the man opened the door and got out. He was a giant. I glanced between Billy and Ms. Emily.

Billy said "That's my good friend Jared. Come on, let's go introduce you, and I'm going to hug that lady if that's Emily Railey." His voice rose, and I thought he was going to jog toward her.

Jared was huge, taller than Billy, with massive, muscular shoulders. His neck and head were the size of two of Billy's. He towered over Ms. Emily, his purple hoodie clinging to his muscles. The giant man glanced toward Billy and me, smiling

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the prettiest smile I'd ever seen. His skin and bald head were dark brown and gleaming.

I followed Billy down the drive toward the car, trotting to keep up with him. Ms. Emily shook Jared's hand. She looked toward us, and Billy walked faster. He said, "Are you Ms. Emily, because if you are, get ready, I'm going to pick you up." He wagged his finger in her direction.

Ms. Emily giggled. "Good heavens, who are you? Please refresh my memory about how I might know you."

"It's been a long time Ms. Emily," Billy said with his handsome grin. "I'm Billy, Billy Evans. I haven't seen you since I was about six years old. I'm eighteen now." He announced his age as if it surprised him too.

"Oh, my word, oh my heaven—uh. What in the world brings you down here? I have a million questions for you. How's June? How long are you going to stay? Are you still going to school? How's your daddy? You drove up here before, asking about Josephine, didn't you? For heaven's sake. You should've said something then." Ms. Emily's questions went on and on. She held one hand to her face and placed the other one on Billy's arm, holding on to examine him. I thought she didn't want to chance letting him go.

Billy said, "It's a long story, but I need to tell you about it, and I want to talk to Josephine if I can." Emily looked at me and

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said, “We have a long story, too, let’s go sit on the porch and talk.”

We walked up the drive, toward the house, Billy talking about how the old place hadn’t changed much. He commented on the quilts and draperies on the line, asking if we were doing spring cleaning. Emily said, “Yes. We’re getting a room ready for Sabine on the second floor.”

When we got closer to the house, Billy said, “Wow, this brings back memories. I remember the night you were here, Ms. Emily, when the deputy brought June and me home from the bus accident. I don’t know what we would have done without you. Josephine had a breakdown, and we needed someone to tend to our injuries. I remember you fed us chicken pot pie and helped us get settled. Jared, here, was on that bus too. He was going home with Ron Simmons. Ron was one of the kids who died.”

“I was just telling Sabine about that yesterday, Billy,” Emily said, as she went into the kitchen to get everyone a cold glass of water.

We followed her inside, and I helped her fill the glasses. “Sabine and I were talking about how traumatic it was for all the children on that bus. I remember Ron. His mom and dad moved away not long after that. You and Jared share an

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unforgettable experience. Collins? I know a very nice lady named Collins, lives on Cedar Street.”

“That’s my mama. All of us Collinses live there.”

“Let’s sit here and talk.”

We put the filled glasses on the kitchen table. “Pull up a chair Jared,” she said motioning to a chair sitting beside the stove. I took a chair from the hall and Billy sat beside Ms. Emily.

Jared sat opposite Billy with his hands on his knees, glancing around the table. He filled up the space like a big teddy bear. I had to peep to the side every once in a while so he wouldn’t catch me staring at him.

“Josephine’s in the hospital in San Antonio, Billy. She’s been there since late last fall and she probably won’t be coming home until September. She got real bad again—couldn’t take care of herself or Sabine. I have temporary custody of Sabine until your mother comes home.”

Ms. Emily gave Billy time to digest the information. She was honest and didn’t seem to mind telling the truth of the situation. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this. I called the County Mental Health Officer over here. The house was unhealthy, and Josephine couldn’t get out of bed.”

Billy stared at his feet as he held a glass of water in his big hands. He rolled the glass between his flattened palms, squinting up at me and said, “Well, not much has changed, has

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it? I wondered how Josephine was getting along. Dad wouldn't let us visit when we were little. He knew we would just get sad about the whole mess again. June and I have been in Longview all this time, until recently.

“We heard the twins were with another family, then we heard Josephine had another baby, that was you, Sabine. Dad wasn't much for traveling. He was always afraid of having flashbacks from his war times and not being able to deal with them in public. I'm sorry, Sabine. I know it's not easy being a kid in this house. I'm glad you have Ms. Emily.”

Billy got tears in his eyes. He knew, and he cared.

“I apologize for not telling you who I was before when I drove up here, Ms. Emily.” His face reddened and he hung his head. “I've been nervous about coming back. I wasn't sure what I'd find. Jared came with me today for moral support.” He shrugged. “Sounds silly, but I just couldn't make myself come alone again.” Billy uttered a nervous grunt of a laugh. “I don't think I've ever been up to the second floor. Seems like we mainly stayed downstairs when I lived here with June.”

He wiped his eyes and grimaced. “It was a rough year in Longview, too. Dad died several months ago, and I'd already dropped out of school to take care of him before he died. His wife, Carol, left when he got sick. June and I were the only people there with dad, trying to keep things together, but we

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couldn't manage going to school, getting him to his treatments, and taking care of him.”

Billy stopped and took a breath looking from me to Emily. “June did graduate from high school. She planned to get married and move to Louisiana. We just got all the financial things in order, sold the house, paid off the bills, and closed all the accounts.” Billy took another deep breath and continued, “I really want to go back to school and finish my senior year, graduate, and see if I can get into college. I'd rather do it here, start fresh. I'm living with my friend, Jared's family, in town, temporarily.”

Billy sat up straight and inhaled. I wondered if he was getting to the part about why he wanted to talk to Josephine. That's what I was interested in.

“We're doing spring training for football. Jared's family is great, but I was hoping Josephine would let me move in here for this last year of school. I have a job at the hardware store in town, and I have money in an account from Dad. I may be able to get a little apartment, if Josephine says no, and still save some money. I'll have to look into that. I'm eighteen now, so I'm considered an adult. I'll be nineteen *after* school starts, but according to UIL, I can still play ball this year. That's important because maybe it'll help me get a sports scholarship.”

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I wanted to tell Billy to move in and we'd deal with Josephine later. Having someone else in the house with me, an older brother would be a dream. Billy did seem like an angel.

Ms. Emily was more careful with her words. "Billy, I'm so sorry to hear about your dad. I've missed you. I don't see any reason why you couldn't live here at the Dunn place and save your money for college. Let me talk to some people to make sure I can give you permission, and I'll let you know. Give me Jared's phone number before you leave here. I want to stay in touch with you regardless."

Billy got up and hugged her and said, "Thanks, Ms. Emily, I appreciate anything you can do. Please let me know, but before we go, can we look around the house some more. I want to see if it's like I remember."

Billy walked around the kitchen looking at the cabinets and up at the ceiling. "This room seems a lot nicer than I remember. It was gloomy and dark in here."

I followed his movements, unable to speak. He and Jared tongue-tied me. Painfully aware of how awkward I must've looked, my arms and hands had no place to go but crossed in front of me. I swayed, willing myself not to tip over.

Until about a week ago the whole house had been gloomy and dark. A misting shadow moved outside the door to the back stairs. Old Dan checked out Billy and Jared. My grandfather

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didn't like them being there. His anger rose and fell in a swirl of what looked like dust to others, but I could see through it, anger. He'd been a racist, just like Josephine. Old Dan was making no attempt to gain release from the Dunn place. He intended to stay and make everyone miserable.

Emily and I took Jared and Billy on a tour of the downstairs rooms. Billy said, "It just didn't feel like this when I lived here. It feels better now. Seems so long ago, but then again, like yesterday."

I was more relaxed as we moved out of the kitchen. Walking into the hall allowed me to feel more in control, and I could think about things to chat about. It helped that Billy asked questions.

"What's all this stuff?" Billy said, pointing to the pile of items from the garage sales.

"Ms. Emily bought all this yesterday to fix up my room," I said. "We stacked it here last night so we could get the room painted."

"Hmmm, what room are y'all going to paint?" He asked. "You know I'm a pretty good painter. I'd be happy to help out. I have to be at the hardware store to work at ten this morning, but tomorrow I'm off all day. Can I come over and help tomorrow?"

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Emily's eyes lit up, and she said, "Darn tootin,' Billy. We'd love to have you. Come upstairs and look at the room we're going to tackle first."

Billy and Jared followed us upstairs. "Nope, I don't believe I've ever been up here. Doesn't look familiar at all from this staircase. In fact, I can remember standing at the bottom of these stairs with June, daring each other to go up. We were both scared."

"Ms. Emily's been working hard to get it cleaned before Josephine comes home," I said. "We had lots of stuff to clear out of the kitchen and off the sun porch." My heart pounded as I bolstered myself to speak. I didn't want Billy to think I had no sense.

Billy nodded. He seemed to know exactly what kind of house Josephine ran, and he'd had the same fear of going upstairs.

"Ms. Emily cleaned and opened windows that had been shut for a long time," I said. "Coming in this morning, I noticed how much fresher the house feels. It used to be musty up here."

When we got to the top of the stairs, Billy peeked in all the bedrooms. He and Jared joked and laughed. I wished for a friendship like theirs. We headed to the back of the house, and I showed them my favorite room.

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“What will you do with all the furniture in here?” Billy asked. “It’s all going to have to be moved out in order to paint.”

“We’ll move it to another room,” Emily said. “There’s some furniture in this other back bedroom that we will clean up for Sabine. I checked and there are a couple of furniture dollies out in the shed. It shouldn’t be too hard.”

“We’ll be happy to help you move the furniture,” Billy said. “Just point out where to put it. You don’t mind do you, Jared? It’ll take them all day, and you and I can move it before it’s time for me to go to work.”

“Sure,” Jared agreed. “Be happy to help out Li’l Sis.” His dimples deepened every time he spoke or smiled.

I’m sure I blushed at Jared’s giving me a nickname. Emily suggested they put furniture in one of the front bedrooms until we could rearrange. The guys moved all the furniture in about thirty minutes with Emily and me carrying drawers.

Billy admired the empty room. He stood in the middle with his hands on his hips, grinning. “This is going to be great, Sabine. I like all the windows. You’ll have lots of light. I personally like a dark room, so I can get my beauty sleep, but you don’t need any more beauty.”

Heat rose on my face again, and I told myself he was just making up stuff to say.

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Billy turned to Emily and said, “We have to hit the road and get to our weekend jobs. Jared’s stocking and sacking groceries at the market. He has to be at work by noon. I work until five today. I’ll swing by after.”

“Bye, Sabine,” Billy called as he and Jared bounded down the stairs. “Y’all be careful. Don’t lift anything too heavy. I’ll be back to check on you.”

“Bye Billy,” Emily called with a big smile. She turned to me, “Sabine, this is such a great stroke of luck having Billy show up just when we need him. He’s truly an angel.”

“Seems that way, Ms. Emily.” I worried that it was too good to be true.

Emily was excited about Billy’s return. She and I talked about how handsome he was and how much we liked his friend, Jared. Emily said she’d ask to speak to Josephine’s counselor during the phone call on Sunday and tell her about the situation. If the counselor thought it would be okay, she’d tell Josephine about Billy being back. “I’ll have to notify the court and let them know. I guess since Billy’s—Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“It looks beautiful, Ms. Emily,” I said after we’d cleaned the room and had the curtains down. “Thank you for helping me.”

“You deserve this and more, Sabine,” Ms. Emily said. “I would do anything for you, and I mean that.”

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Emily was excited to see the paint on the wall. We were both excited about Billy. His coming back felt like a dream. I had never met a man that was so easy-going and pleasant. I didn't know if I could trust the feeling.

Smiling wasn't as easy for me as it was for Billy and Ms. Emily. Maybe, I'm really different. I expected bad things, and when something good happened, I stood in awe and wondered when it would go away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

1999

Sabine

SABINE FELT THE pull of the stables as she rocked on the tack room porch, a sensation as strong as she'd felt when she was a young teen with her own horses. Even without the horses there, the barn and paddock were the most comfortable place for her to experience the Dunn Ranch. Animals had always been her relationships of choice. Human bonds had been difficult and still were. "You're still a young woman, Sabine," June would say, unsolicited. "You have time to meet the right person and settle down."

Who would the right person be, and what did June mean by *settling down*? Sabine preferred to settle up. Her relationship with June wasn't all that smooth either. How did Sabine intuit the perfect mate for June was Eric, but couldn't see herself with a partner or even want the same?

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Dr. Eric Shelton, the handsome veterinarian, was the obvious husband for June. Sabine had recognized his even temper and quiet admiration of her sister the first time they'd met him on the Shelton Ranch. June had a turbulent childhood, even after she'd left the Dunn ranch. She'd experienced addiction, struggled through rehab, and made the tough changes after months of hard work.

Even though June had trouble accepting Eric's attention, Sabine witnessed his discreet determination to win her sister over. The couple had been honest with each other from the very beginning and opted for premarital counseling when the time came. Sabine admired both of them and envied their relationship. She loved them, even when June was irritating.

However, Sabine couldn't picture herself with anyone.

She stood from the rocker as it continued to move to and fro and stepped off the tack room porch to wander through the lush plantings along a gravel path to the Dunn house. She intended to tour the third floor before Daisy and Dale Dawson arrived to take her to dinner.

Thoughts of June's courting, took Sabine back to the long conversations they'd had in their suites in the garret, as Dale called it. Sabine's suite allowed her a private place to get away from guests on the lower floors, and June's suite was an identical room for her to use on long visits from Louisiana.

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Recalling the sister suites also reminded Sabine of her great grandmother, Elizabeth, and the mental illness that had stalked the family.

Elizabeth's ghostly being preferred the third floor, once dark and stuffed with the early furnishings and accessories of the Dunn house. The relics Elizabeth had collected were crammed in the attic alongside a trunk she protected, a container much like a zip drive that Sabine, the adolescent, would scour for family history.

She entered the front foyer, ignored a wispy specter of Elizabeth peering out the long windows framed around the front door, and mounted the curving stairs without glancing at the marble tiles beneath the staircase.

Cecil Dunn had been no model of mental health, as far as Sabine knew, but his wife, Elizabeth—stark raving mad. Her sons, Daniel and Ethan had known her better than anyone. She'd hid her mean spirit from Cecil, evidence for Sabine that Elizabeth could have been rational if she wanted to. The woman was able to manipulate Sabine's great grandfather with her pretty face and sweet words. Elizabeth had claimed a Creole heritage. However the people Sabine knew from South Louisiana, namely Rene and Millie Collins, were kind and charitable. Elizabeth's lies had always given her just enough magical charm to make her dangerous.

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As a child, Sabine had known none of the Dunn history. The discovery of a trunk full of letters, photos, and journals had been Sabine's obsession when they cleared the attic for renovation. The battle between Elizabeth and her son, Daniel that followed were their attempts to tell Sabine the version of the story they'd chosen for her to know.

Sabine hurried away from the top of the stairs, mindful of what could happen if someone tumbled down. Elizabeth had been smart, capable of designing and executing the building of the Dunn mansion. Her old hometown, New Orleans, had exposed Elizabeth to the French influence she craved for the couple's new ranch house, not that far from the Louisiana border. Sabine stopped in the middle of the upstairs foyer and rotated, her eyes trained on the ornate detail in the panels and moldings. She imagined Elizabeth sitting with a craftsman, describing her dream for the room.

Sabine liked to think of herself as too smart for her great-grandmother's manipulation. As a child, Sabine had seen her many times, exotic and haunting. Elizabeth had demonstrated how she could cause Old Dan to cower and flee. Sabine had shown a strength that her grandfather didn't have, probably because she'd never had the guilt-ridden relationship with Elizabeth LeDoux Dunn.

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The mysterious Creole woman, dressed in loose, gauzy clothing and draped with jewelry including amulets, could swirl herself into a wraith capable of blowing back Dan's hair as Sabine felt the gale against her own cheeks.

Sabine crossed the wide second floor foyer to the door to the stairs. The attic storms that Elizabeth had orchestrated for Sabine's benefit only frustrated the woman's spirit. In hindsight, Sabine thanked Josephine for giving her the experience of recognizing *disturbed*. Sabine glanced at the framed photographs hanging in the lighted stairwell. The poses were staged, revealing nothing of their experiences in the Dunn house. The people stood or sat stiff, as if their faces had been painted with the same starch that smoothed the wrinkles from their clothing.

Most people never recognized the vulnerability in the unstable, because they backed away. Sabine had stared that weakness in the eye, daring her mother and great grandmother. The unflappable courage had worked every time.

As Sabine climbed the attic stairs to the third floor, she recalled the days as a teenager when she would watch with excitement as Elizabeth's ghost had swirled into a frenzy designed to cause Sabine to flee and abandon a trunk full of evidence and family documents. However, Sabine didn't leave.

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Elizabeth had also unintentionally blocked the truth about her sons, their weakness, but also their revenge.

Sabine swung the door open on the landing at the top of the stairs. A gust of air caressed her face. The fragrances of smoldering rosemary and sage still clung to the rooms. She was relieved the old specters hadn't returned with their musty scents, rodents, and shadows. Daisy had done a good job of keeping the house fresh.

Sabine flopped back on her comfy bed and replicated a snow angel motion across the spongy duvet. The room sparked memories of conversations with June about what she'd wear on New Year's Eve, a magical ball, the first date with Dr. Shelton.

Sabine's suite, across the hall from June's, had allowed them endless hours of gossiping, chats, and giggles during June's visits. The best memories though, the absolute best, were while the house was in transition, and Billy had been home.

Sabine

1982

After Billy left, Ms. Emily and I sat on the screened porch at a small table for lunch, watching the quilts ripple in the breeze. They were the same quilts, hanging from the clothesline, I'd twirled and danced around earlier before Billy arrived. Cloud shadows moved over the muted cloths, then the sun would

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return and brighten the furling fabrics, reminding me of the shifting darkness and blinding light in my own life. The movement of the panels and the dizziness I felt in the folds before Billy arrived caused a jerking inside me. I expected to still myself. But, my mind had never been that simple. I wasn't exactly confused, but suspicious of my own feelings. Why did I refuse to trust?

I would be ten on my next birthday in August, three months away. My principal and counselor had decided, after testing, I should be promoted to the sixth grade instead of the fifth. Changing schools might be a good thing. Maybe no one would know me or Josephine. Maybe I would have Billy. Maybe Josephine would be cured of whatever was wrong with her. Maybe ten would be a magical number.

That's what I mulled over while I chewed my lunch, as if working my jaw could help me flip on the cartoon lightbulb over my own head. It would be so much like Josephine not to trust, and I didn't want to be like Josephine. I told Ms. Emily I'd performed my duty by singing and dancing around the quilts. Maybe if I said it aloud I could figure out my worries weren't necessary.

"That should be enough to do the trick of banishing anything negative, Sabine." Emily pulled the rosemary and sage bundle from her pocket. "This will produce a fragrant smoke. We'll

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walk through the house and insist that any spirit with negative intention must leave. We'll be confident in our demands." Emily sniffed a bundle of herbs and passed it to me.

"It's a good idea to do this 'smudging' every week to cleanse the house of any negativity that's been brought in."

"We don't ask them to leave," I said. "We tell them?"

"Yes. We must be firm. You'll like the smell of this, Sabine," Emily said, holding a large ear-shaped abalone shell out for me to place the herbs in. "We can plant some in your garden so you'll have a good supply for the future. You know, when people come in and out of the house, and you don't know them very well, sometimes they bring negative energy that lingers; it sticks on things."

Ms. Emily was right. The negative spirits in the house were more than my family. They were the derelicts Josephine, Old Dan, and others had invited inside. That's what Josephine had done. She'd plastered me with confusion. If it's this easy to banish the unwanted in the house, why can't I find a magic wand, something to twirl in the air, say some magic words and my jumbled thoughts disappear?

"What are you thinking about?" Emily's voice was a whisper. "I see that far-away look."

"I'm weird, worried, and suspicious. I don't have any friends, and I don't think I want any. I admire Billy and Jared,

but I don't know what to do." I lowered my voice to whisper the truth. "I don't want to be like Josephine."

Ms. Emily patted my shoulder. "Your resilience and positive intention is a gift, Sabine. Don't use negative labels. Replace the words with *determined*, *optimistic*, and *hopeful*, or whatever. Change the words and you change your outlook. I truly believe you can handle anything, but mind your words."

"Hmm. I hope so. What you say makes sense," I said, glad to know Ms. Emily thought change was possible. "I'm glad you think I can be positive. I'm going to try. I think the garden needs lots of rosemary and sage, a big supply."

"You know," Emily added. "Negativity can attract negative spirits. You're brave, Sabine. You've done hard things before. I witnessed your bucking up to teachers and the principal on behalf of your friend, Reggie. Not many kids would have done that, but you stuck to your guns because you knew you were right."

"I don't consider myself brave," I said, rubbing my forehead. "I do think of my knowing as a good thing, a gift. I guess it's the only thing I have. I don't have control of anything else."

"You're a gift to me, Sabine," Ms. Emily said. "Your intelligence is a gift and so is your insight. I want to be around you as long as I can. It's a privilege, really. You have so many gifts. I've never met anyone as smart as you, and you're

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adaptable. I know school is rough sometimes. You'll have another friend. The right person will come along and you'll recognize them. You and Reggie were friends at just the right time for both of you."

After we ate, I followed Ms. Emily with the smoking bowl to each room in the house, asking the positive spirits to remain and insisting the negative spirits leave. Ms. Emily was right. The smoke smelled good. The air in the house felt lighter. I even released some of the anger I had toward Josephine. However, I wondered if the negative spirits had to first admit to themselves they were negative. How did all of this stuff work?

Ms. Emily asked me to spread old newspapers on the floor in my new bedroom while she went downstairs to collect the paint and brushes. I worked alone upstairs, focusing on overlapping the pages. Old Dan and Cecil were gone.

I stared out the windows, trying to visualize the yard with a garden full of vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers. Keeping a garden would be constant work, but it was work Ms. Emily seemed to enjoy, outside work, under the trees and sky, digging in the dirt. Fruits and vegetables would be a bonus. Gardening could keep me occupied, and maybe Josephine would like a reason to be outside.

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When Ms. Emily returned, I gazed out the open window and said, “I think keeping a garden could be good for Josephine, if she’ll do it.”

“I agree, Sabine. Having something to occupy yourself and being productive can be a boost to your mental outlook. Gardening always helped me through hard times.” Emily pried the lid off the paint, stirred for a while, and poured some in a roller tray. She handed me a roller. “I think we can expect some adjustment time when Josephine comes home.”

We painted for about two hours before taking a break. As I watched the paint roll onto the wall I was thrilled with the fresh look of the color, but I also thought about what Ms. Emily had said about an *adjustment period*. How long would that take, and what would Josephine be like after she adjusted?

Ms. Emily suggested we paint all the trim around the windows and doors white. I agreed it would be better than the old gray trim. All of the other upstairs rooms had unpainted wood trim.

Later, we sat in the kitchen eating apples, drinking cold water, and playing with cut-outs of furniture on a diagram of my room on graph paper.

“I appreciate your hard work, Ms. Emily. You probably have other things you could be doing.”

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She grabbed me under the chin and said, “I have nothing else to do. This gives me purpose, and everyone needs that. You’ve been a gift to me Sabine. Just let me enjoy this time. Don’t fret, enjoy it with me. And on top of all that, Billy’s back! Woohoo!” She threw her arms up over her head and waved her hands.

By five we had put two coats of blue paint on all the walls in my room. As it dried, we were upstairs in the back bedroom, examining the wrought iron beds, when we heard a car pull into the driveway. I looked out the open window. Billy walked toward the back porch. “He came back,” I said, shocked.

“I knew he would, Sabine, ’cause he said he would.” Ms. Emily yelled out the window, “Come on upstairs Billy, we’re up here.”

Billy bounded up the stairs. He glanced in the painted room and said, “Boy howdy, y’all got the whole room done. Y’all don’t play.” He had a deep east Texas drawl common to the piney woods, one I rarely heard. Marvin’s voice had had a similar twang.

“Welcome back, Billy,” Ms. Emily called, “Now come in here and give us some advice on these beds.”

Billy walked in grinning, with a roll of paper under his arm. My heart raced a little. Billy’s smile took over the room. I had never experienced such a feeling of joy at seeing someone’s face.

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It must be what a baby feels at the sight of their mother. I couldn't remember.

“Smells good in this house,” he said.

“We're going to use the double bed in Sabine's room as her sleeping bed,” Emily said. “We'll set up one of the day beds under the windows as extra seating, a place to read, and a spot for sleepover guests.”

I couldn't imagine who that would be, but I didn't say anything. She'd said not to fret. Ms. Emily pointed out the rusty spots on the beds.

Billy said, “That's not a problem. The beds can be sanded and repainted. White or even black would be the best colors. Don't you think?” He ran his hand over the metal frame. “I can use my employee discount and get some white spray paint from the sale table at the hardware store. Jared's dad, Mr. Collins, has a hand sander I can borrow.”

I watched Billy as he talked. He had all the answers and more to Ms. Emily's concern about rusty spots. He was a doer and took charge. What would Josephine think about him being at the Dunn house?

Emily was beside herself, “Hooray! You know how I love a deal, Sabine. Billy, you're a treasure. I'll give you some money before you leave. You get however many cans you think it'll take.”

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Emily led Billy back into my room and asked his opinion about painting the trim around the windows and doors. I followed, still in awe that I had a brother. I listened to them chat, watching his easiness. The fingers on his big hands splayed and pointed, and then his hands would land on his hips as his head turned up to the ceiling. I wanted to grab his hand and examine the knuckles and his nails. My attention was focused on all the newness of him.

Billy agreed that white would be the best for the trim too and said he would be happy to help. He asked about the ceiling.

Ms. Emily said, "I know it's a little dingy Billy, but we can't reach from the ladder we have, and I don't think my back can take it."

"I can borrow some scaffolding and Jared and I can do it. I'll be happy to do my best for some of your homemade chocolate chip cookies." He grinned bigger and lifted his brows. "Might as well get it done while the room is empty."

"Okay, then. I wouldn't mind throwing in some chicken and dumplings and a pan of cornbread." Emily winked at Sabine and said, "This is called bartering, Sabine."

Billy winked too and whispered, "Don't tell Ms. Emily, but I think Jared and I are getting the best deal." Billy grabbed the rolled paper from under his arm. "Oh yeah," he said, "I almost forgot. This is for you Sabine." His eyes widened. "It's smelly

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drawer liner. You put it in your drawers and it makes them smell good.” He poked me on the arm and said, “Not your under drawers, the drawers in your bureau.”

My face flushed with heat. I was flattered Billy had given me a gift and speechless and embarrassed by his joke. My mouth went dry, and I swayed, shuffling from one foot to the other, not knowing what to say, or what to do with the paper. I was afraid if I tried to talk, I’d blubber.

So, I swallowed hard. “Thank you, Billy.”

Emily said, “Billy, that’s so nice of you.” She looked over my shoulder at the wrapper on the paper. “It says the scent is lavender, Sabine. Your drawers are going to smell fabulous.” She and Billy belly laughed. I was still speechless and in awe of my big brother’s bringing me a gift. I’d never been in this position before, and for me, it wasn’t a joke.

Emily motioned us back to the other room where Billy helped us take the beds apart to move them downstairs. He took the mattresses into the upstairs hallway. Emily suggested we put them out on the balcony the next day in the fresh air. We put the bedframes on the back porch, downstairs. I helped by collecting the nuts and bolts and putting them in a bag.

As we turned off the lights and closed the house, the sun dipped over the pasture, radiating through distant clouds. Billy stopped to stare at the sunset.

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He said, “Don’t take that view for granted, Sabine. Not everyone can look across a pasture and see those bright rays spiking through heaven. Most people gaze out their windows and see a skyline of freeways and houses.”

I’d only known Billy for less than ten hours. He was probably the best eighteen-year-old I would ever meet. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to say something dumb and have him think he had a dork for a half-sister, so I looked at the sunset and said, “Yep.” Only I knew how many times I’d sat behind the cistern and stared over the pasture.

Ms. Emily had her fingers pressed against her lips and big tears in her eyes. I’d seen her get emotional a few times at Billy’s words. I wanted to keep the moment. I would fight to keep these people in my life. What would happen when Josephine came home?

I would beg Josephine to let Billy stay. He couldn’t leave again. He had to be the best thing Josephine had ever done. If Josephine sent Billy away, I would hate her for the rest of her life. I could forgive her for some things, but I could never forgive her if she let Billy go.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MS. EMILY INVITED Billy to join us for dinner, but Jared's family expected Billy for a barbecue to celebrate a birthday. "I would like to take a rain check on that though, Ms. Emily. I remember how good those chicken pot pies were," he said. "I even bought some at the grocery store once, hoping to have that same buttery flavor, but boy was I disappointed. Yours are much tastier." Emily beamed as Billy walked us across the road.

He said, "I'll be back in the morning about eight to start painting the trim. Jared might come with me, but some Sundays he drives his grandmother to church. Keep your plans if that's what you do on Sunday. Don't worry about hanging around."

"We'll be here, Billy. I don't want to miss another chance to see you," Emily said.

Billy ducked his head and smiled. "Okay, then. See y'all in the morning." He took a few steps backwards, and then turned to jog across the road to his car.

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“Thanks again for the paper, Billy, I really like it,” I called after him. It was easier to thank him as he was turned away.

“You’re welcome, Sabine.” He said over his shoulder. I liked the way he said my name.

“I’m so impressed with that young man. Your brother has grown into a fine fellow. I just fretted so about him and June. It’s so good to see him, don’t you think?” Ms. Emily was still staring after him as he drove off down the road. We gave him a big wave.

As we entered Ms. Emily’s house, I asked if she thought Billy would be there in the morning. “He said he would, Sabine. I take him at his word.” Ms. Emily said we would skip church and help Billy. I hoped we would never go back to church or the restaurant for Sunday lunch.

Ms. Emily talked to herself as she took plates from the cupboard for dinner. “I need to think about what I’ll say to Josephine. She’s not going to believe that Billy’s back. I don’t know, it could be a real shock for her. He’s such a polite and upbeat young man.”

“I don’t think I would ever forgive Josephine if she doesn’t let Billy stay,” I said.

“Don’t fret about that, Sabine. You just let me handle Josephine. I think I can convince her.”

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Ms. Emily warmed up leftover chicken and noodle casserole. I ran things over in my mind as I chopped tomatoes and tore lettuce for salad. Each time Billy left, I thought he wouldn't come back. Why would anyone come back?

We sat in Emily's cozy kitchen and talked about what we'd work on the next day. She said, "You know, Billy will need a room too, Sabine. He can pick one out, and we can all work to get it ready. However, Marvin's old room on the first floor and the kitchen are in livable shape. I'm of the opinion he could stay there."

I agreed. He'd probably want a room upstairs, though, away from Josephine's. I told Ms. Emily I would look through some magazines after dinner to get some ideas about the window coverings she'd asked me to choose. "I hope I can stay awake, Ms. Emily. I'm so tired."

"Yes, we've had a full day. A great day full of surprises and good news." Emily smiled with closed lips and droopy eyes. Surely she was as tired as I was.

"Tear pages out of the magazines if you find something you like, Sabine," Ms. Emily called over her shoulder to me after we'd cleaned the kitchen. She headed to her room to get ready for bed, leaving a folder for my clippings on the kitchen table.

Later, after a bath, I crawled into bed thinking I'd had one of the best days of my life. I was excited about how the summer

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would be anything but boring with all the projects we had ahead of us and getting to know Billy and his friend, Jared. But, I worried how I would fit into the changes.

I picked up the book on my nightstand when Ms. Emily knocked on the door to say goodnight. “Sweet dreams, Sabine, see you in the morning.”

I decided to say it again, “I love you, Ms. Emily. Thank you.”

She pressed her fingers to her lips, and her eyes glistened again. “Love you, too.”

I fell asleep, the book in my hand, the lamp on. Waking in the middle of the night, I turned the lamp off and closed the book, setting it back on the bedside table. I snuggled under the clean, crisp sheets, inhaling the sundried linen, and began to dream.

Josephine was in the ocean, her dark hair floating on the top of the water and tendrils plastered to her face and forehead. Her hands reached up over her head. Billy, in a boat, threw her a life ring and yelled at her to grab it. A storm raged, the waves rolled, and rain pelted us. I tried to yell, but couldn’t make words, only a frantic shriek. I jumped out of a yellow rubber raft to get closer to Josephine, but wet hair was wrapped over her eyes. There was another man there. He was handsome, like Billy. The man tried to coax me out of the water. He called my name and warned me not to let Josephine pull me under. His hands, held

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out in my direction, were big and strong. His fingers were long with knuckles like Billy's

Billy shouted out to our mother, but Josephine's eyes were still covered. Hands came toward the back of my neck as if to strangle me from behind. They didn't belong to the men. The knuckles didn't match. I watched from behind the hands, out of my body. They were small, pale with long painted nails. I heard someone say, "Sabine." My eyes flew open.

My heart pounded. Damp hair clung to my cheeks. I could swear the person saying my name was in the same room, a male voice, like Billy's, but maybe older. I propped myself up to sit and stared into the dark room, trying to make out the shapes silhouetted against gray light from outside. The outlines were only furniture.

I took deep breaths and told myself it was only a dream. Only a dream, but dreams always meant something. What? Had there been a presence in the room with me? Was the voice a warning? I didn't have the answers, only more questions. Was the man trying to get my attention away from Josephine? Why am I seeing him and hearing his voice *now*? He's trying to tell me something about Billy, but what?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I SQUIRMED UNDER the quilt, trying to go back to sleep after another dream. Thoughts of Billy, my new room at the Dunn house, Josephine coming home, and nightmares bothered my mind. So, I got up to get a glass of milk and sat at the kitchen table, staring at an import store ad, wondering about the visions I'd had. Maybe I should write them down.

The kitchen was cool and quiet, dark except for the refrigerator light when I opened the door and the faint blue glow easing across the screened porch and into the kitchen. Ms. Emily said I was nocturnal because I could move around the house at night without turning on lights. After I searched for that word in the dictionary, I agreed with her.

I washed the empty glass, dried it, and put it back in the cabinet. "Less work later." Ms. Emily said in my head. She was right again. Walking into a tidy kitchen in the morning was always better than waking to clutter.

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Before I went back to bed I peered out, squinting through the front room window, for lights from the Dunn place. The security light at the corner of the house, the one that threw shadows across the littered backyard, flickered through the trees between Ms. Emily's and the Dunn house. The glow was barely visible among the thick spring growth, only a glimpse when the breeze moved the leaves. If I hadn't known the light was there, I might not have seen it.

What would it be like when school was out for the summer? Would Billy be living there? Would every day be like today? After only two hands full of hours, I knew Billy liked to paint and didn't mind work. He liked sunsets, loved Ms. Emily's chicken pot pies, played football, and had a best friend. I knew lots of things about Billy, but what does he know about me?

Did the cleansing rid the house of Old Dan? That seemed like ages ago with everything we'd accomplished this afternoon. Any spirit that escaped the Dunn house might have followed me. It didn't seem likely, but someone had said my name in Ms. Emily's guest bedroom. Could a spirit be trapped with me? Where'd they all go after the smudging? Some of those kids might have been my only friends.

I looked forward to seeing Billy again tomorrow. I'll make an effort to laugh when he does and try to be clever, not embarrassed by his silly jokes. Usually when someone laughed,

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they laughed at me. I was like Marvin, serious and suspicious. Billy's attitude was so much better. I would try to watch him and imitate him.

The next morning, the aroma of baking traveled to the bedroom, causing me to think I'd overslept. Ms. Emily was up with biscuits in the oven when I entered the kitchen. I'd dressed in old jeans and a t-shirt and pulled my hair back in a ponytail. It wasn't as smooth as Ms. Emily's brushing, but good enough for cleaning and painting.

Ms. Emily hummed, frying bacon and scrambling eggs. She didn't bother wearing an apron over her paint-splattered jeans and faded T-shirt. "Good morning, Sunshine," she said. "You ready for this day? I'm going to put together some breakfast sandwiches. It's already 7:30. I thought we could take something over for the boys. You want anything before then?"

"No thanks, I'll wait and eat with the boys," I said, liking the sound of "the boys." Ms. Emily's happy voice told me she was having fun planning meals for more than the two of us. Her face glowed, especially when she was doing things for other people.

Ms. Emily should have had a houseful of grandchildren from her dead son by now. It wasn't fair she lost him and the chance to know his children. But, if he were here, with his daughters or sons, I might not have had Ms. Emily to help me.

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This could be fate's big plan. Emily's son gave his life for America, so I could have her when I needed her.

Ms. Emily interrupted my thoughts. "I spotted the pictures from the ad, Sabine. I put them in the folder with the rest of the stuff. I like that look. Did you like the bamboo rollup shade?"

"I think so," I answered, not really certain, but it looked nice in the picture. "What do you think?"

"I think it's eclectic and bohemian, just perfect!" She giggled.

What did that mean, more words for me to decipher, but it seemed like Ms. Emily approved. After placing a slice of cheese in the egg and bacon sandwiches, I wrapped each one in wax paper and packed them in a basket and then covered the basket with a thick dish cloth. Ms. Emily poured a thermos of coffee and pulled a big bottle of orange juice from the refrigerator.

"I have no idea if the boys drink coffee, but I bet they'll have some juice." Emily talked to herself. "We'll use the dishes at the Dunn place and wash them when we're done. You ready to head out, Sabine? Double check, do we have everything we need?" She probably didn't expect me to answer.

I carried the thermos and the jug of juice as we walked down the dirt drive, headed across the road to the Dunn house. Birds chirped in the early morning and pecked under the trees through dewy grass in Ms. Emily's yard. Billy was right, none of those

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little things should be taken for granted. Every day was special. He was making them more special for me and Ms. Emily.

How would we find special if Billy weren't here? I didn't want him to leave. If he left, the sunsets, birds, and flowers would surely go with him. I tried to push the thought from my head and concentrate on what was right with the world. I heard a voice say: *The sunrise brings hope. Let the sunset bring peace.* It was the same male voice I'd heard in my dream the night before. Emily hummed and glanced at the sky. I supposed she was thinking about Billy too.

My heart raced when we could see into the driveway. Billy's car wasn't there. Will he show up? I felt a cold nose on the back of my leg. The voice and Remy urged me to think positive.

Ms. Emily set the basket on the edge of the porch while she searched her pocket for the key. She put it in the lock, twisted, and swung the back door open. As we stepped inside with our hands full, the interior was light and fresh, the sage and rosemary mingling with bees wax and lavender-scented cleaner. Ms. Emily scooted into the kitchen and set the basket on the counter.

"I'm going to leave the sandwiches covered until the boys get here so the food will stay warm. Let's think about what we want to accomplish today, Sabine." She planned our day as she took cups and glasses from the cabinet and poured us drinks.

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“I’ll work here this morning with you young people, painting and cleaning furniture, but I think I’ll go home before lunch and cook a hot meal and be there when Josephine calls. I don’t want to miss her call today. We have things to talk about.”

The clock on the stove said it was five after eight. My mind raced with what could keep Billy. I wanted to pace on the porch but didn’t want Ms. Emily to see me worry. She put a glass of orange juice in front of me and sat across the table where we waited. The whine of the refrigerator was the only sound in the kitchen.

I imagined the sweating breakfast sandwiches made a cartoon cloud over my head that curled a finger at me and made my mouth water. As I stood to look out the back door, a car pulled in the drive. It was Billy. I stood next to the back door, my heart pounding.

He parked and got out, grinning as he glanced up to me. “Come help me carry this stuff, Sis. Sorry I’m late. I had to drop Jared at his grandma’s. He’s going to church with her this morning. He won’t be able to help today. Hope y’all didn’t start without me”.

I laughed as I approached the car, trying to make my face look easy, but I wanted to cry with relief at the sight of him. Billy collected bags of spray paint from the back seat of the car.

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He took the heaviest, handing me the smaller one before he grabbed a gallon of paint.

“Welcome back, Billy. I’m glad you’re here. Ms. Emily has some breakfast sandwiches for us.” I wanted to greet him and be as good at conversation as he was, but I sounded like a robot.

“Breakfast sandwiches!” He whooped. “Why didn’t you say so? I’ll race you.” Billy took off running. At first, I watched, and then ran after him. He sped away, reached the porch, and held the door open for me. The cartoon cloud must be curling its finger at Billy too. We put the bags of paint on the floor in the hall and went into the kitchen, where Ms. Emily had unpacked the sandwiches and put them on plates on the table with napkins.

Billy was like the wind off the Gulf, swooping in on us. His personality blew around the room like glitter, leaving tiny specs of himself here and there, impossible to wipe away. That’s how we knew him. He held nothing back and celebrated this moment being himself. I stared at him. He was homeless, worse off than me, but he wasn’t sad or worried.

“Good morning, Billy, coffee or juice?” Emily asked. “You two certainly are full of energy this morning.

“Good morning, I drink coffee Ms. Emily,” Billy said, his breath catching from the sprint. He stood, while Emily poured the coffee. “I got in the habit when dad was in and out of the

hospital. Waiting rooms always have coffee. These sandwiches smell great. You have energy today too, Ms. Emily, already busy in the kitchen this morning.

“Jared’s going to be sorry he missed this. He’s taking his grandma to church. She lives by herself, and he tries to spend time with her on the weekend. They don’t want her driving, but she has a car, so Jared offers to drive her to church.” Billy barely breathed as he gave the report on Jared and wolfed both his and Jared’s sandwiches.

“He did say he could help me next week with the ceiling paint and sanding the bed frames. Man, these are delicious.” Billy was seated now, talking as he gobbled the sandwiches. I watched him until my mouth went dry, and I needed a sip of juice. His excitement and energy were there even while he ate. I wouldn’t be surprised if he got a stomachache.

Emily shook her head and smiled. “Eat up, Billy, we have plenty. I made enough for you and Jared both.” She turned to the counter and poured more coffee into her cup. “How do you know that nice young man? You’ve been away from here for a long time.” She sat at the head of the table close to him.

Billy wiped his mouth with a napkin, took a sip of coffee, and said, “Jared was one of my best friends in school when I lived here. We played on a little ball team together. His dad was

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the coach. When the bus accident happened, all four of the boys who were killed were on our team. He and I stayed pretty close.”

Billy managed chewing and talking as he told us about Jared. They’d been friends since they were four. Now, I’m almost ten and I don’t know what having a good friend would be like.

Billy’s voice was serious as he talked about the Collins family. “When Jared’s mom found out June and I were moving to Longview, she made sure Jared would know how to reach me. She sat me down before we left and told me that she would pay for the phone calls so Jared could stay in touch. She was real worried about him. She even drove him to Longview twice to visit me when we were seven and eight years old.”

My lip quivered at the thought of Jared’s mom not wanting him to lose Billy too. He drank more coffee and rubbed his forehead. Tears welled as he continued telling us about his friend. “Dad was real good about letting Jared and me have time together, but his wife, Carol, didn’t like that Jared was Black. She threw a fit when Dad said he could sleep over with us, so Dad got a motel room, and we would have a boys’ weekend away. I lost all respect for Carol over that.”

Carol sounded like Josephine. Well, maybe not exactly like Josephine, but she was prejudiced. I’m sure Jared felt that racism on his trips to Longview. At least Billy’s dad tried to make him comfortable.

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“Jared and I talked on the phone at least once a week until I was about twelve maybe thirteen, then it just got too hard to keep up.” Billy stared out the kitchen window when he set his plate in the sink and then ran water with a bit of soap.

“After Dad died, I called Jared’s mom.” Billy turned toward us as we sat at the table, leaning against the kitchen counter. “She was the one who talked me into coming back here to finish high school. Jared failed fourth grade, so now, we’re seniors at the same time. He was diagnosed with a learning disability, something about reading. There’s a name for it. I can’t remember what it is. School has been hard for him. He’s had a lot of support at home and worked real hard to keep his grades up.”

Billy took another swig of coffee and wiped his mouth with a finger while I hoped Jared never had Mrs. Patterson as a teacher. “Jared’s a talented athlete and excels in football. The coach insists the players go to tutoring to keep us on the team. Jared’s a team leader. Everyone looks up to him. He’s a giant, towers over all of us, but he treats everyone with respect. He doesn’t take advantage of his physical size to bully anyone. He’s always been like that, a big teddy bear.”

I watched Billy as he talked about how he and Jared had kept their friendship with the help of Mrs. Collins. He cared about Jared’s learning problem like I had cared about Reggie. Billy

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and I were a little alike. I wanted to hear him talk longer, because the longer he talked, the more I could pick out our connections.

Emily said, “You’re lucky to have such a good friend, Billy.”

“Yeah. Mrs. Collins would be willing for me to stay with them for as long as I need, but I don’t want to impose on them too long.” Billy picked up his cup and returned to the table. “They’re good people. Jared’s dad works offshore on a drilling rig, and Mrs. Collins teaches kindergarten. They work hard and I know it’s not easy for them to have someone living with them and three children of their own still at home.”

While I listened to Billy, I longed for a friend. I’d kept to myself most of the time. I wasn’t bothered, not having a group to be with in the lunchroom, but it would be nice to have one good friend. I wondered what clever thing I could say, but it didn’t seem to be the right time. How did Billy do all this conversation stuff so easily? I have no stories about a friend, just animals.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

1999

Sabine

SABINE EXAMINED HER jeans and put on a fresh, white button-down blouse for dinner, tying a navy spring sweater over her shoulders. She picked up the Pat Conroy novel, *Beach Music*, she'd been carrying around all day and lifted the strap of her dark red hobo bag over her shoulder. Daisy and Dale were due to pick her up within the hour. She planned to wait in the swing on the back porch. She sat and dug lip gloss from her bag applying it with her little finger. After wiping her finger on a tissue, she rubbed her hand over the spine of the book.

The cover of the novel reminded Sabine of trips to the Bolivar Peninsula and crossing the Intracoastal Canal with Jared and Billy singing to the radio in the front seat, the windows rolled down, and the foamy waves breaking so close to the road they could hear them. She ran her fingers across Pat Conroy's name. He knew something about dysfunctional families. Yes,

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the characters were interesting, but the drama could eventually wear a person out if you were at the center of it in real life.

Sabine had decisions to make, and they weighed on her. As the only heir to the Dunn estate after Josephine's death, Sabine had inherited what was left of the ranch, the house, and all the mineral rights. She'd deeded the house to Ms. Emily and her husband, Jimbo, but it was returned to her after their deaths. Now the question was whether to sell the property and house, or keep it, a legacy for her nieces and nephew, June's children.

Mr. Holmes, Josephine's attorney, had searched for her biological children, because in Texas biological children have strong inheritance rights, and Josephine had given birth to six children. What he'd discovered was sad. Sabine and June were the only biological children still living at the time of their mother's death. June had in theory disowned the Dunn family and rejected the inheritance. However, Sabine filtered the bounty to June through gifts and donations.

June had no interest in or need of the Dunn property. She'd never hidden her negative opinion of Josephine or the place. However, Sabine had grown up with the spirits, the creek, and pastures, the Gulf breezes, the critters and birds, especially the birds, and the memories. It wouldn't be easy to abandon those things to someone else, someone who wouldn't know what the

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place had been through. That would be almost like erasing one of Conroy's families, their colorful if not crazy antics.

Sabine's nieces and nephew were too young to hear the R-rated stories of their family legacy. They wouldn't be able to understand the history of murders, abuse, and mental illness that had been the Dunns'. Maybe it would be best to move on and leave it all behind.

Sabine imagined herself years from now, telling June's adult children stories around a fire near the creek on Shelton Ranch. Unbelievable stories about their grandmother, Josephine and her grandmother, Elizabeth. *Will I leave the giant, leather bird book behind, the notes scribbled in the margins?*

If it weren't for Sabine's digging through the trunks and chests in the attic and reading Josephine's journals, she and June would never have pieced together the sordid history of the Dunns. The mystery would have died with Josephine, and the ghosts would have filled the Dunn house with their swollen arrogance.

Sabine could live anywhere, but her friends were in New York City. The rural country between Winnie and High Island, Texas wouldn't be on their radar for a get-away. She would always have her memories. Maybe she could write the history, an unbelievable story, really.

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She knew June's opinion. "Cut yourself loose from all that dysfunction, Sabine. Let it go and get out of there. When you come to Texas, come to us and our guest house. And, we'll have the perfect excuse to visit NYC, at least twice a year. Take the money and run." Sabine smiled. She could see her sister lecturing her with her slender hand waving in the air, her painted fingernails glinting like red warning beacons.

Somedays, the choice seemed like a no-brainer, and others the inheritance was like the weight of the world.

She thought about Elizabeth and Cecil Dunn, the original owners, her great grandparents. They weren't people of admirable character. They'd obtained the ranch under dubious circumstances. Everything about the place had been tainted by them, and the house had deteriorated from there. She felt no loyalty to her great grandparents.

So, at this very moment, Sabine's decision was to sell, keep the positive memories of Billy, Ms. Emily and her husband, Jimbo, the horses and dogs, the birds and move on. However, she'd see how she felt about that in the morning.

Sabine

1982

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Billy announced after breakfast that he had all the paint for the beds and window trim. He regarded Ms. Emily as if he needed an assignment.

“Billy, we’re eager to get the room done so we can start moving things in,” she said. “If it’s okay with you, I’d rather you go ahead with the trim so it can be drying. If we can’t get to the beds today, we’ll work on them later.”

“All righty then.” Billy clapped his hands, “I’ll get to work.”

Upstairs, Billy headed into my room to get ready to paint. Ms. Emily and I went in the back bedroom to select more furniture pieces. Two matching chests were the perfect choice for bedsides. We removed the drawers, taking them to the balcony so we could work on them outside in the fresh air and breeze. Together, we had no problem carrying the empty chests through the opened walk-through windows to the porch.

We pulled the mattresses out on the second-floor porch and set them in a patch of sunlight that would later disappear, obscured by the roof.

Ms. Emily planned to take the lampshades home with her to vacuum them. She said, “You know, Sabine, you’re going to need a vacuum cleaner to keep your rug looking nice. Even if Josephine has one downstairs, it’s nice to have one up here. I’ll remember that when I go to garage sales this Friday. I should make a list.”

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I stared at Ms. Emily, wondering why she would think Josephine would have a vacuum cleaner. As Emily strategized for garage sales, I cleaned the drawers of the chests. A folded note was stuck in the corner of one of the top drawers. It was printed in small, crabbed lettering on yellowed, lineless paper. It said:

Teeney.

*Please don't tell dad what Daniel
and I told you this morning. We
can deal with it. We will get in
more trouble if he tells Elizabeth.
Daniel says not to worry. We will
be okay. If you need to leave, we
understand. It's not safe here,
Teeney, but we can manage.*

Ethan

According to Ms. Emily, Teeney was a woman with a little girl who'd worked at Dunn Ranch and probably lived in the house. I read the note twice, refolded it and put it in the pocket of my jeans. What was Ethan asking Teeney not to tell their father? Was he attempting to scotch a punishment or was there a real danger? If Daniel was in on it, they must have been up to no good, but the attempt at comforting Teeney was sad coming from young boys. How old had they been? The writing looked like a child's. I didn't know the reason for the note, but then I

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heard a voice telling me, I would. I wondered, but I trusted my instinct and the voice.

A big tin of bee's wax and some old, torn T-shirts were what I used to buff the wood on the drawers to a nice finish. Ms. Emily worked on the top and sides of the chest. A pleasant odor of wax filled the foyer when we moved the chest back inside. The wood was warm to the touch from sitting in the sun, and my fingers were slick with the melted wax.

I had put drawer liner Billy had given me on a shelf in the closet in my room. I went in to get it. Billy, painting the top trim of the windows, had his back to me. His broad-shouldered silhouette filled the casing, the outside light glowing around him.

I stared. I couldn't believe I had a brother, standing in my own room, helping me. Just a few months before, I'd lived in two rooms with a sick woman who couldn't make herself get out of bed. I imagined he had the wings of an angel as the light poured through the window around him.

When he noticed me there, he asked, "What are you up to, Sis?"

"I need to get my new drawer paper to put in the chests. We're going to leave them in the hall until we get the rug in here. The windows are beautiful, Billy. Thanks for helping," I said, hoping I sounded as happy for his help as I was and not like a robot.

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Billy shrugged and said, “I love to do this kind of work. I like to stay busy. I’m never bored if I have a project like this. I’ll be done with this first coat by noon.” He turned to glance outside again. “The yard needs some work too. You could have a really great view through these windows.”

I wondered about my brother. The only males I had known were those Josephine knew. So far, my opinion of men wasn’t positive. But, when Billy talked, he told me little things about himself that made me like him even more. He liked sunsets, staying busy with projects, noticed the generosity of the Collins, recognized Jared’s kindness and leadership, so many little things. Billy was talkative, but not annoying. I trusted him.

There was just enough paper to fit into each drawer. The lavender fragrance mingled in the foyer with the aroma from bee’s wax. The chests looked better than anything I could have imagined. All the years I’d lived downstairs, not knowing the upper floors were full of furniture, while there was no bed for me, or place to sit in the living room.

Emily set the dusted lamps on top of the chests and stepped back. “I think these lamps will be just fine after I clean the shades, don’t you Sabine?”

“They’re nice. I like them.” The designs on the porcelain bases were floral with beautiful details. I had never considered having lamps beside me as I slept until I’d been in Ms. Emily’s

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guest room. This new room would be much different from my musty mattress. The lamps were pretty, would provide light, and they were mine.

“Let’s explore and find some more furniture to work on,” Emily said, rubbing her palms together. The second floor was full of items to consider for my room. Everything I needed had always been there, but somehow there’d been a wall between me and comfort.

Billy walked into the furniture room where Emily was eyeing the prospects for more pieces. My heart raced and my mouth went dry. Maybe a drink of water would help me breathe. Was it inhaling the bee’s wax that made me dizzy? I called out to Ms. Emily and Billy. “I’m going downstairs for a drink of water.”

The water did help. Did being on the second floor have anything to do with my heartbeat thudding and my head spinning? I returned using the newly cleaned back staircase. As I started up the stairs, I could hear Ms. Emily and Billy talking. I sat on one of the upper steps to listen.

“Do you think Sabine might be depressed, Ms. Emily?” Billy said. “She’s not like the other girls her age I know. She’s not giddy and talkative and she seldom smiles.”

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“She’s been through a lot with Josephine, Billy. She hasn’t confided in me, but I suspect she’s been abused by some of the people who liked to hang out over here.”

“Here let me help you with that,” Billy said, as something heavy was scooted across the floor.

“Thanks. I try to keep an eye out, encourage her to talk, but she’s secretive. We play cards and chat, but she is tight-lipped if I ask questions. She holds it in.”

“Hmm. Maybe it’ll be a gradual thing. As a big brother, I hope I can help.”

“That’s sweet, Billy. All we can do is be here for her and let her know she is safe with us. I think she expects the worst, and she is totally caught off guard when something good happens. Believe me, she has made some progress since the first of the year.”

My stomach dropped. I held my cheeks, my elbows propped on my knees as a sickening chill traveled down my back. Am I that pitiful? Does everyone watch me and wonder?

Billy’s boots thudded in the room. Furniture being moved vibrated across the floor, and then Emily spoke again. “I knew the situation with Josephine was not the best, but I didn’t know it had gotten as bad as it was. I would have called Child Protective Services if I had discovered it sooner. As it turned out, I’m happy Sabine has been able to stay with me. She works

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hard every day to express her feelings. She's figured that out herself. She should probably be seeing a counselor." A large piece of furniture squeaked across the floor. "I've talked with the school social worker about it several times, but she seems to think her behavior doesn't warrant therapeutic counseling. Sabine's smart as a whip. She makes perfect grades. Those, supposedly in the know, point to her intellect and say she's okay."

Billy mumbled something and the tread of his boots crossed the foyer and into my room. I took a deep breath, stood, and stepped the rest of the way up the stairs to the partially open door. Eavesdropping didn't always give me information I wanted to hear, however, snooping opened my eyes to the fact that I might be on the right track. I had something to work on. Would I ever be normal? I couldn't see myself being as boring as some of my classmates, but I couldn't see myself with Billy's liveliness either. They were talking about me because they cared, I guess.

I went back into the room where Emily waited. We had a task, but I was still thinking about the conversation I'd overheard. There was so much work to do, but I needed to work on myself too. Josephine had let the house go, but she'd also let me go.

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My heart pounded, and tears waited to spill. I took a deep breath again and willed myself to focus on what Emily wanted to accomplish. If I wanted Billy to stay, I'd have to show him I could be okay. Crying in front of them would cause them to worry.

"I like the idea of having a rocker with a lamp for reading." I swallowed the knot in my throat as I ran my hand across the arm of one of the wicker rockers. I could imagine it with a colorful cushion on the seat, maybe a throw or blanket. I wish I could sit there right now and cover myself, hide.

"Well, we have several to choose from," Emily said.

We picked out the rocker that seemed to be in the best shape. "We can paint this, and I can recover the cushions with sections of the old quilts. What do you think about that?" Ms. Emily said finally, focusing on my face.

I nodded, still distracted about the worry that I was depressed. I didn't want to be like Josephine. Emily attempted to wobble the desk and the round oak table. "This table would be a nice place for homework and the art projects you like to do, Sabine. "The desk is an option, but the table would be perfect in a corner with the view out the windows."

"Yes, I like that, Ms. Emily."

"You okay, sweetie?" Emily held her palm to my forehead. "No temperature, but you seem flushed."

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“Just a little tired. I’m okay. Really.” I took another deep breath willing myself to put aside the conversation I’d heard. Thinking too hard about it made me behave in the way that made Ms. Emily worry.

Billy tapped on top of the lid to secure it to the paint bucket. “I’m going down to clean this brush. Wait for me and I’ll help move the furniture to the porch.”

Emily and I carried two oak chairs through the open, walk-through windows.

He came bounding up the stairs saying, “Can y’all believe it’s already noon? Time flies when you ‘re having fun.” His grin was contagious. I was still in awe of him, wondering how he could be so happy about helping with work.

Emily said, “I’m going home and fix us some lunch. Y’all come over in about an hour and I’ll have it ready. Billy, will you bring the cushions that are on the porch, please? I’m going to cover those for that wicker rocker. Sabine, will you bring that smaller quilt. It’s already been washed.” Emily smiled. “You’ve sung your songs to it and danced in the sun. I think that’s enough cleansing and fabric to cover both cushions. I’ll have my hands full with the stuff from breakfast and the lampshades. I’ll leave the orange juice and what’s left of the coffee.”

“Well, Sis, I guess we have our orders,” Billy said. “We’ll wax up this furniture to kill time until lunch.”

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We stood in the dappled shade on the upstairs porch. He opened the wax and picked up a rag to get to work. I watched him out of the corner of my eye while I was wiping wax onto a chair. He grinned as he buffed the wax into the wood as if watching the exposed grain tickled him.

“You know, Sabine, when Josephine gets home, you’ll probably be spending a lot of time in that room. I remember when she was bringing people in and out at all hours of the day and night. The kids needed a space to get away and have some privacy. We usually hung out in the living room, but there wasn’t a place to sit or sleep. I remember June spread a quilt on the floor and we all sat on it with a couple of books and some stuffed animals different people had given us. Sometimes we’d pull the quilt underneath the piano and pretend it was a tent.”

“Yeah.” I agreed. June couldn’t have been more than seven and thinking of her siblings. “It’ll be nice to have a place to get away. I guess Josephine’s been like that for a long time, huh. She seems so miserable. I wish she could get better. I get tired of being disappointed.”

Billy laughed. “It’s really not funny. That’s exactly how I always felt. We can’t control her. All we can do is take care of ourselves and control how we react to her.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “I hope you stay for a long time Billy. I used to have the best dog, Remy. Josephine never figured out

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Remy slept in the house with me almost every night. We never fed him. He ate with the family down the road. He was actually their dog in the beginning, but Ms. Emily and I went to Mrs. Dawson after Josephine went to the hospital and asked if Remy could stay with me. She said she didn't give a damn about him and let me keep him."

Remy was a nice memory, a reminder that I'd had a companion to focus on during the worst times with Josephine. "He got killed—run over on the road. Ms. Emily had him buried before I got home from school. Remy was my best friend. I wasn't looking forward to coming back here to Josephine without Remy." I stopped waxing and watched Billy continue to rub the table.

"You know, I can talk to spirits, Billy, even animal spirits. Remy has already told me he's okay."

"Hmm. Sorry about your dog, Sabine," Billy said, looking up from his work. "That's pretty funny that you had a dog and never had to feed him. Josephine never figured it out?" He chuckled. "You're pretty resourceful. I know there are people who are sensitive to spirits. It seems like a big responsibility to me. If I could communicate with any spirit, I would hope it would be an animal. What kind of dog was he?"

"He was a fuzzy little dog. Ms. Emily said he was probably part Jack Russell Terrier. He was white and light brown with

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big brown eyes. I loved his sweet personality, and he was so smart.” I smiled when I remembered Remy’s attitude. “We didn’t have to talk out loud. We had whole conversations without saying anything aloud. Ms. Emily and I had a memorial for him. He was a good dog. I dream about him all the time.”

“You’ll probably have another dog one of these days, Sabine,” Billy said, looking at me with sad eyes. I was relieved that he got me. He understood and didn’t think I was weird.

“I do want another dog someday. Remy can’t be replaced, but even he tells me I’ll have another dog.”

“Look at this table,” Billy said, calling my attention to his handy work and stretching his back and arms. “This is really nice-looking wood. It’s solid. I think it has enough wax. I’ll move it into the hall. Are you done with those chairs?”

“Sure,” I said. I’d been killing time, taking the opportunity to talk with Billy.

“You’ve been smiling ever since I met you, Billy,” I said. “How do you stay happy all the time?”

“Huh, I guess I have,” he said. “For one thing, I’m glad to find you and Ms. Emily. I’m hoping Josephine will allow me to stay here. I haven’t had a normal family in a long time. I’m looking forward to it. I love doing this kind of work, you know, doing something and being able to see nice results. I can make

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something better, just by being with it for a few minutes. Don't you think that's a good thing, Sabine?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think that's a good thing." I smiled. Billy *was* making things better, and there was a lot to make better at the Dunn house, but he wouldn't find a normal family here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I WALKED SLIGHTLY behind Billy as we trudged the quarter mile toward Ms. Emily's. The hard road would turn to gravel and then to sand the closer we got to her concrete driveway. Billy carried the rocker cushions over his head, while I carried a quilt. We talked and laughed as I stared at the back of his head, his dark hair glistening as he twisted the cushions in a silly dance. He'd unbuttoned his shirt and it flew behind him as we faced the breath of the Gulf breeze. The county had recently mowed the roadside ditches after the wildflower blooms faded, and now, the gust forced the clean and spicy scent of wild onion into my nose.

"I wonder what we're having for lunch." Billy said.

"Delicious stuff. Ms. Emily is a really good cook." My spirit had lifted after leaving the Dunn house. Outside, our conversation was more natural, for me at least. I enjoyed the walk with Billy. I hadn't been able to stay outside for long days,

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like I would have if Josephine was home. Even before Billy had arrived, Ms. Emily and I had been indoors cleaning. “Ms. Emily has been teaching me about cooking and keeping the kitchen organized. Josephine is in for a rude awakening when she gets home.”

Billy cackled so hard he almost dropped the cushions. “I want to be a fly on the wall when that rude awakening happens. Josephine is the queen of squalor! She might break out in a rash if things are too clean.”

I glanced up as his pace slowed, and his smile disappeared. He said, “I was pretty shook up after that bus accident, but I remember when we got home, Ms. Emily had trouble finding soap and food. Seemed like time was moving in slow motion.” He lowered his arms and carried the cushions in front of his chest. “The house was a mess, like always, and nothing was where it should’ve been. Ms. Emily had to go back to her house to find the things she needed to doctor our injuries and feed us. That’s the first time I ever remember being so ashamed of the place.”

I knew what he meant. Our childhood home was neither comfortable nor safe, and Ms. Emily had noticed that, too. Now we were old enough to take care of ourselves. “I always told myself I didn’t notice the condition of the house, but I really did. Josephine is her own worst enemy sometimes, and I just need to

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worry about myself. I don't think she's comfortable in anything, not even her own skin."

Billy grinned really big and said, "You're exactly right, Sabine. As a little kid that's hard to come to grips with, but you've done a good job."

"If it hadn't been for Ms. Emily, I wouldn't know any different." I smiled. She'd helped me deal with Josephine's neglect for a long while. Besides, I wasn't a little kid. I used to be, but now I'm just a kid.

As we stepped onto Ms. Emily's back porch, I smelled lunch, a heavy odor of frying meat and baking bread. Inside, the table had been set with salads and iced tea in special glasses, not the everyday plastic cups I was used to.

Ms. Emily stirred white cream gravy in a black skillet to go with chicken-fried steak and mashed potatoes. A pot of fresh green beans with a floating ham hock simmered on the stovetop, and a pan of biscuits browned in the oven.

"Wow," Billy said. "I haven't had home-made chicken-fried steak in ages or biscuits twice in one day!" He stood over the platter of meat and potatoes on the counter.

Emily beamed at him and said, "You two deserve a special lunch. Put those cushions in the front room, please. I already have my sewing machine set up and ready." She bent to take the biscuits out of the oven. "Drop the quilt in there too, Sabine, and

look at that spray paint I set out. I found it in the shed. I think it's enough for the wicker rocker. What do you think about the color?"

I followed Billy into the living room and left the quilt by the sewing machine. The paint caps on four cans of spray paint were leaf green. I lifted a can and held it next to the quilt. "I think they complement each other. What do you think, Billy?"

"Your vocabulary surprises me sometimes." He squinted with one eye and grinned. Billy took one of the cans and shook it. Talking in a squeaky voice, he held his can close to the one I held. "Why yes, madam, you look mighty fine today in your green hat." He took the other can from me, "Well, thank you sir, you are quite dashing yourself." He dropped his arms and stared at me. "Get it? They're complimenting each other."

I rolled my eyes. "I get it. You're silly. They're spelled different, homophones."

"I am not a homophobe. I know you are, but what am I," Billy said, still talking in the squeaky voice.

"What?" I squinted with both eyes. "Homophone. Not, homophobe." I blew out air making my lower lip flutter. "Is that even a word?"

Billy laughed. "Oh, it's a word alright. *I know you are, but what am I?* That's what brothers say to sisters when they want to harass them."

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“Why would they want to harass their sisters?” I didn’t get that part, and I planned to look up homophobe in the dictionary.

“Because that’s what they do, Sabine. You better get used to it.” He smiled and shook his finger at me, and then he put his big palm on the top of my head. The pressure of his hand guided me back to the kitchen as if he was the puppeteer and I was the marionette. He didn’t move his hand, leaving it there while the warmth spread through my hair and onto my head.

This could be my family. However, in the back of my mind I knew I could lose it all. I expected to lose it all. That thought kept me from flinging my arm around Billy’s waist and pulling myself toward him. It also kept me from softening to his jokes. He could direct my movements, but he couldn’t change all of my bad thoughts. Or, could he?

We sat to eat. Billy dug into the mashed potatoes with a piece of meat on his fork. I swear his eyes rolled back in his head. Ms. Emily said, “Billy, Sabine is doing so well in school she’s been promoted to sixth grade, skipping right over fifth.”

My neck felt hot and the heat traveled to my cheeks. I wished Ms. Emily hadn’t mentioned me skipping a grade.

“Wow, Sabine. That’s quite an accomplishment. So, you’ll be in middle school next year?”

“Yeah. I’m nervous about being in a new school with more mature sixth-graders.”

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Billy laughed. I'm sure he couldn't imagine mature middle school kids. "I'll be a senior next school year," he said. "I want to play all the sports, football, basketball and baseball. Maybe I'll run track, too. I'd like to get an athletic scholarship. That's my goal. I'm a B student, so an academic scholarship isn't in the cards. Man, this food is delicious, Ms. Emily."

Emily ran a napkin over her mouth. "Thank you, Billy. I'm glad you like it. Eat up. There's plenty." Emily set her fork down and took a sip of tea. "My heart's racing a little about talking to Josephine, but I'm confident she'll agree to you moving into the Dunn house. Don't worry, Billy," she said. "I have a couple of alternative ideas if Josephine says no, but she wouldn't dare."

Billy couldn't stop raving about Ms. Emily's cooking. He ate half a pan of biscuits. He and I intended to work on the beds and paint the wicker rocker after lunch. I wanted more chats with him while we worked. Having a task made it easier to talk.

I helped Ms. Emily clear the table. Billy washed the dishes. She said, "I put some cups of banana pudding in this bag for your afternoon snack. There are a couple of apples in there too. You two have been working hard. I'll let you know when I hear from Josephine."

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On the walk back to the Dunn house, Billy danced, shaking the paint cans. He could spread his fingers and hold two cans in one hand. He bounced and skipped as he shook the paint.

“You’re going to make yourself sick, Billy,” I said. “I can’t wait to have some of this banana pudding, but if you throw up, I won’t be able to eat mine.” My step quickened behind him, as he shook the cans, causing the metal balls to clang around inside. I curled my toes to hold my thongs on my feet as I struggled to keep up.

Billy laughed aloud when he glanced back at me. I must have looked like a penguin in ragged jeans, scurrying down the sandy road, my feet clinging to the flip-flops I insisted on wearing.

“You don’t know me very well, Sabine. I could eat another chicken-fried steak, *both* our banana puddings, and run a mile.” He tipped the paint cans toward me as if to shoot me. “If you’re going to lecture me about dancing, you’re going to need to wear different shoes so you can keep up.” He said all that with a big grin.

He continued walking backwards and shortened his stride so I could catch up. He grabbed my shoulder when a silver truck barreled down the road toward us, and he squeezed when it zoomed past. I remembered Marvin complaining to Josephine about that guy in the silver truck.

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When we arrived at the Dunn house, Billy found a whisk broom in the storage shed and brushed off the wicker chair, and then wiped it down with an old T-shirt while I put the banana pudding in the refrigerator alongside the partial jug of orange juice.

The pudding and orange juice were the only things in the ice box. I imagined they could talk to each other in the dark when I closed the door. I talked to the appliance itself, letting it know we were making changes, and it wouldn't be lonely any longer. I patted the door, still gleaming with no smudges since Ms. Emily had cleaned it. I pressed my cheek to the cool metal and then stood back to examine the spot. I left it there to show Ms. Emily it was my refrigerator, but I was sure she'd wipe it off when she noticed.

I put on Beatles music in Josephine's room and turned up the volume before I joined Billy outside. While Billy sprayed the chair, I shook the other cans. I tried to make up dances as creative as his. He gave the chair a good first coat, letting it dry while we sanded the bed frames, then he gave the chair another coat. Two coats covered perfectly. We moved the bed frames away from the porch and sprayed them with white paint. I shook. Billy painted.

Billy and I took a break to have the banana pudding before putting a second coat of paint on the beds. Sitting on the

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screened porch, we looked out over the pasture while we spooned creamy pudding into our mouths, rolling our eyes at each other and moaning at the goodness. Billy winked at me, and my heart smiled.

“Ms. Emily and I planted that spinach about a week ago,” I said, pointing to the green globs in the raised beds.

Billy looked up as he dropped the spoon into his empty plastic cup. “Looks healthy. I like raw spinach, but not a fan of it cooked. I don’t know how Popeye could eat that stuff right out of the can.”

“Who’s Popeye?”

“You’ve never seen a Popeye cartoon?” He looked at me with wide eyes, like I’d said I didn’t know where my nose was or something.

“Never. We don’t have a television, in case you haven’t noticed.” I turned my gaze back to the planting beds. “You’d like Ms. Emily’s spinach frittata. We’ll have to get her to make us some when this crop is ready.”

“I might try some if I can have a biscuit with it.” He smiled thumping his thumb on the glass top of the patio table. “I think anything would probably taste good with one of Ms. Emily’s homemade biscuits.”

The lunch we’d eaten was delicious, like most of Ms. Emily’s meals. Cooking was one of the ways she showed us she

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loved us. She'd seemed a little nervous about the phone call with Josephine. Would our mother listen to Ms. Emily? I couldn't imagine that Josephine would be happy about any changes made to the Dunn house.

Billy and I went to work again, chatted, and waited. I was nervous too. In all my life, Josephine had never squeezed my shoulder to keep me from crossing the road.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I SAT ON the edge of the porch as Billy walked around the yard collecting litter. We waited for paint to dry. I wondered about his life before he came to the Dunn house. “Was your dad a good cook, Billy?”

“We ate a lot of take-out and burgers,” he said. “Carol, Dad’s wife, didn’t like to cook.” He picked up a piece of rusted metal and studied it.” Hospital food wasn’t very good, but at least it kept June and I from getting hungry. I’ve eaten more than my share of bad cafeteria food and vending machine stuff. Seems like everywhere I’ve lived there’s always been a cafeteria involved.” He set the rusted metal on the edge of the porch. “I didn’t start paying attention to the quality of food until I moved in with Jared and his family. His dad can make a vegetable taste like glory.”

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Billy sat on the step below me. I wondered where he'd lived with a cafeteria, but I would ask him about that later. "Fresh vegetables make all the difference," I said. "Don't even taste like something out of a can."

I eyed the neglected implements and tires collecting stale water and mosquitoes in the yard. It was hard to imagine it could ever be a real garden. The sun warmed my legs as I sat on the top step. Red birds jumped from branch to branch in the tops of the oaks and dragonflies flitted around the tall grasses not far from where I sat. The rapid beat of their wings made a tiny whirr. A whiff of spray paint lingered in the air, chemical and new. Billy had removed his button-down shirt, and his damp t-shirt clung to his chest. His body radiated heat. We worked and rested. It was perfect.

"Speaking of food," Billy broke the silence. "Do you have a favorite restaurant?" He stood from the middle step and then stooped to pick up discarded cigarette butts from the dirt and put them in the empty cans he'd collected. "Why do you throw your butts down here, by the way?"

"Ha. You know those aren't mine. They're probably Josephine's. Somebody always has to pick up after her. Don't get me started on Josephine and her crappy friends. What an entourage."

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“Entourage? You use some mighty big words.” Billy mocked a frown.

“That’s what I do in my spare time. I hunt for words in the dictionary, especially if it’s raining. I read the books and National Geographic on the shelf in the living room. I look up all the words I don’t know in the big dictionary. I like to watch my classmates’ faces when I use a word more than two syllables.”

I considered his question about a restaurant. “The last time I went out to eat was with Ms. Emily and Mrs. Lawson after church; I vomited all over the table.”

Billy stared at me with eyes as big as Josephine’s silver powder compact, and then he hooted with laughter. I giggled, and we couldn’t stop laughing. I accidentally spit with laughter, and Billy laughed even harder. Tears rolled down our cheeks. I didn’t know why I said it, and I really didn’t know why we were laughing, but it truly was the last time I’d gone out to a restaurant. I laughed so hard, I lay back on the porch, my legs dangling over the edge. I held my sides with both hands. If I tried to sit up and caught sight of Billy, still laughing, I fell back, laughing again.

“Say what?” Billy sat on the step below and leaned toward me. “How did that happen? You didn’t know you were going to

be sick?” His brows drew together and his green eyes glistened between his lids.

I sat up, sighing and gathering my thoughts, sniffing, and composing myself. “I was feeling funny, but I had no idea I was going to upchuck,” I insisted. “Mrs. Lawson was talking the whole time, saying I ‘wasn’t really feeling bad, spoiled, ruining their lunch.’ Her face was distorted like what you see when you look at yourself in the reflection in a shiny Christmas ball or an old hub cap or something. My head was spinning and so was my stomach.”

I wiped the corner of my eye with the sleeve of my T-shirt and sniffed, wiping my nose on my sleeve too. “Ms. Emily was so good about it. She kind of told Mrs. Lawson off and we left. I kept thinking about all that vomit on the table. I don’t ever want to go to that restaurant again. I think the waitresses would run if they saw *me* coming.” I remembered the embarrassment, not funny. “I heard some whispers and giggles after I got back to school from being out sick. I don’t have any good friends, maybe none, but that deal gave people another reason not to sit with me at lunch.”

“That could probably happen to anybody, Sabine. I think I remember Mrs. Lawson, maybe. I bet that shut her up for a while.” He chuckled. “You’ll get a fresh start next school year. I predict you’ll make a great friend.”

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I was surprised at how easy it was to talk to Billy as I admitted something I probably wouldn't say to anyone else. I couldn't remember laughing so hard, ever. I hadn't imagined I'd ever laugh about that day. "Yeah, she did call after we got home to check on me. She may have felt bad about doubting my sick feelings. When I thought about it, I had only been sick like that one other time. I just threw up on the mattress and slept on the other end. Josephine never checked on me. One of her friends finally brought me some water. I started feeling better."

"You were probably dehydrated, Sabine," Billy patted my knee. "When you get sick like that, you should be drinking fluids, so you don't get dehydrated. That's one of the big things I've learned playing sports."

That was good advice. I'll try remember it. I could hydrate myself without waiting for Josephine to tend to me. I had looked up hydrate before. I knew exactly what it meant.

"I don't know many places in town," I said. "I mostly stayed out here. Josephine would leave me here by myself and bring home a pizza or something. Ms. Emily is such a good cook and has all the fresh vegetables. We eat at home most of the time."

"Well, I haven't eaten out much either," Billy said. "Jared and I go to this burger place called Nate's. I would have to say that's my favorite." He shrugged and looked me in the eye.

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“We’ll have to go sometime. We can treat Ms. Emily so she doesn’t have to cook.”

I studied Billy’s face, thinking that was a considerate thought. I’d always thought Ms. Emily enjoyed being in the kitchen, but she probably would like a meal out every once in a while.

“Nice of you to think of that, Billy,” I said, wondering if I’d complimented him before. “You’re probably right. Ms. Emily would enjoy a treat. She’s always doing things for others.”

We had all the painting done and it had dried by half past four. Billy stood and glanced around, bouncing his fist against his thigh. “Wonder if Ms. Emily’s talked to Josephine yet?”

“I don’t know. Hope everything goes like we want it to. Let’s take the beds up and bring the mattresses in.” I stood and stretched.

“Yeah, let’s go. That’ll help pass the time.”

It took us three trips to get all the bed pieces to the second floor. Billy carried the bottom parts of the longer pieces behind me as we went up the stairs and was patient as I lifted the fronts and took one step at a time, slowly. He carried the rocker over his head and left it in the big foyer upstairs. We closed the balcony windows.

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“Jared and I will paint that ceiling tomorrow. When that’s done the rug and furniture can go in your room.” Billy wiggled his eyebrows.

He peeked in all the rooms and suggested we should think about moving a chest down to the back hall. “We can put a lamp on it and place a nice rug in front of it. We can drop our keys there, maybe hang a hat rack beside it. A chair would be nice to sit in while tying our shoes and such.”

I thought it was a good idea, and we planned to mention it to Ms. Emily. I imagined Josephine walking in the back door. Would she think she was in the wrong house, or would she step in and not see anything, like the dead lizard that had shriveled in front of her bedroom door?

The back screened-door opened and slammed shut as we stood at the top of the stairs. We froze, staring at each other. My heart pounded. *Did I want to hear Ms. Emily’s news?*

Ms. Emily came up the stairs with the recovered cushions under her arms. “You two have been busy. Look what I have!” Billy rushed to her to relieve her of one of the cushions. She put the other on the rocker as we admired her work.

Billy smiled. “Looks like you have been busy, too, Ms. Emily. I had no idea you could get that done in one afternoon.” He fluffed the cushion he held and tossed it on the rocker. “That

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was great banana pudding, by the way.” He circled his stomach with his palm.

“Thank you, Billy. I’m glad you enjoyed it. Well, I have great news!” She stepped back from the chair. “Josephine is happy to have you home and would like for you to stay here and go to school next year.”

I got a lump in my throat, and my eyes burned with tears. I focused on Ms. Emily, afraid if I glanced at Billy’s face I would break down.

Ms. Emily beamed when she turned to Billy. “I told Josephine and her counselor what a responsible, helpful, young man you have grown to be. Josephine is looking forward to seeing you again.”

Emily’s spin on Josephine’s comments sounded good. However, it didn’t sound like anything Josephine would say. She didn’t know how to talk that way. But, I jumped up and down anyway with tears in my eyes.

Billy said, “Thank you, Ms. Emily. I know you did your best saleslady job.”

“Well, I didn’t tell her anything that wasn’t true, Billy. You’ve grown into a fine young man. Josephine is going to be so proud of you.” Emily smiled at the two of us while we celebrated the news.

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I couldn't talk. I was afraid I would crater into a bawling cry and embarrass everyone. I hugged Billy around the waist, and he hugged me back. "We can work on that garden now, Sabine," he said squeezing me into him.

"Yeah," I said, barely able to get out one syllable. My lips quivered, and I could barely talk.

"Well, I'm as thrilled as both of you," Emily said, her eyes glistening. "Sabine and I have another something to look forward to now. Billy. We need to get to work on *your* room and get a place ready for you to sleep. You can move in whenever you like."

Billy hung his head and shrugged. "This is really good news." He took a deep breath. "I think I'll go back to Jared's and tell his family I'll be moving out here and maybe see if I can take them out to dinner or something. I'll plan on moving over tomorrow afternoon, after school and before football practice."

"You can stay in the downstairs room while we work on a room for you upstairs," Emily said. He agreed that Marvin's old room would be fine temporarily. Emily held her arms over her head in her victory dance. "Woohoo!" She whooped, waving her hands. "I have another project, a purpose for my garage sale adventures."

I couldn't imagine the days getting any better. The house felt wonderful. I hadn't seen or heard anything from Old Dan or

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Cecil since the cleansing. I hoped they wouldn't return. The darkness in the Dunn house had been lifted.

"Tell Ms. Emily your idea about the back hall, Billy," I pleaded as we walked downstairs to close up the house.

Billy repeated his idea to Ms. Emily. We stood in the hall choosing a place for an entry piece. "That's a marvelous notion, Billy," Emily agreed. "We have everything we need upstairs. It's just a matter of moving it down here and setting it all up."

"Great. You and Sabine pick out the furniture, and Jared and I will move it down next time he's over." Billy flashed me a smile and winked again.

It had been another perfect day. We had taken control of the Dunn house. Billy and Ms. Emily's conversation was a rumble in my head, because my mind was spinning with the news and the anticipation of Billy's moving in. I couldn't believe I'd have someone else in the house, someone with some common sense, someone who seemed to care, someone who was my brother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1999

Sabine

DINNER WITH DAISY and Dale went better than Sabine had expected. She'd wanted to give them a head's up to let them know she was considering selling the Dunn ranch, and she was worried about what that would mean for their own property. However, shortly before they'd arrived Sabine had an epiphany.

They sat at an isolated booth at Nate's, sharing a large pizza. "You two have been part of my family, the sane part, the part after Ms. Emily and I became family. I appreciate you taking care of the Dunn house while I'm away, but I need to make a decision." Dale's smile disappeared and Daisy glanced at him with a worried expression.

"Don't worry I won't sell unless it's a buyer like the group I told you about earlier. They want you to continue to be

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involved in the maintenance of the house, an overseer type situation. But, it dawned on me that you could expand the acreage around your place by taking some of the Dunn Ranch property for your own.”

Dale cleared his throat. “That would be a dream, Sabine, but right now, we’re not in any position to make any large investments.”

Daisy glanced up from her plate. “We’ve always loved the land, Sabine, and the house. Dale and I both have fond memories of the place as a bed and breakfast. Of course, you need to make plans for yourself, but don’t worry about us. We’ll make our way just fine.”

“The group I’m considering selling to doesn’t need a massive amount of land. They mainly want the house, stables, access to the creek and county road. I was thinking the 220-acre parcel backing up to your place could give you privacy and more grazing.” Sabine stared at Dale’s face.

“Well, it could,” he said. “But, cattle prices have been down lately, and I don’t want to chance financing anything.”

Sabine smiled. “I’m not talking about selling it to you, Dale. I want to gift the land to you, along with the mineral rights.”

“Oh, Sabine. You should think twice about that. I don’t remember much of anything my daddy said, but I can hear him loud and clear saying *only a fool would sell their mineral rights.*”

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“Yeah. I heard Josephine say that a few times, too. But here’s the deal. I’m not selling them. I’d be giving them to you. I want to do this. You’re family. If you give me the go ahead, I’ll talk with my attorney and get it all set.” Sabine grabbed Dale’s hand. “He has the record of production and I think you’ll be very pleased. That parcel is on a lucrative salt dome. Think about what you could do around your place with the royalties. You wouldn’t have to worry about having funds to invest in your own property or sweat cattle prices and the cost of hay.”

Dale’s eyes misted. “You forgave me a long time ago, and you’ve always been overly generous with me and Daisy, but I don’t deserve what you’re offering.”

The sting of tears welled in Sabine’s eyes. “You apologized and said I didn’t have to forgive you a long time ago. You made the first move. I know how much courage that took. Sometimes the passage of time can make us come full circle to a new place. I’ve never regretted the second chances I’ve given, never. I’m in a position to do this now, and it’s what I want to do. It’s damn near what I need to do to settle it in my own mind. The Dunn family has made a mess of things, and I’m the only one left who can make things right. Will you accept it, please? It’s what I need to be able to release the curse of the Dunns.”

Dale smiled at Daisy and nodded. “When you put it like that, how can we refuse?”

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Sabine heaved a sigh of relief. I'll call my attorney tomorrow."

Waking in Josephine's room was surreal. At least it wasn't Josephine's bed—the bed had been updated a couple of times since her wallowing. Sabine threw her arms above her head and stretched. Despite June's worries about hauntings at Dunn House, Sabine had slept all night, and comfortably.

She checked her cell phone then entered the spacious tile bathroom. The update of the room was one of Sabine's favorites. Now, it rivaled anything she'd seen in *Architectural Digest*. Josephine had no idea what she was missing. She, of all people, on a good mental health day, would have enjoyed lavishing in the room.

Sabine stared at herself in the mirror. *I have to stop negating every memory of her. It's my anger that dwells on the bad stuff and resents her. Even June wants there to be good memories to share with her children.*

Years of therapy couldn't erase the things that bubbled up sometimes. Walking into a perfectly appointed room that Josephine never got to see, brought back the resentment. *I guess recognizing that's the case is some kind of progress. But still, that's a haunting in a convoluted way.* June could be right, getting rid of the house and all those memories could be freeing.

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After talking with Dale and Daisy the previous night, Sabine was committed.

The Dunn house was different, but it was still there, a symbol of the family and all the dysfunction. It was familiar. The pain and neglect were familiar. She saw it in every room, the memory of herself as a child, waiting. *Waiting for what? Must have been Billy.*

Sometimes, in the mirror, Josephine's face stared back at Sabine. The image wasn't the beautiful green-eyed, auburn-haired young woman who was admired at Buck's Bar. It was the black swirling eyes of a demented soul who stared back. Sabine used to whisper to Josephine, "Open your eyes." Now she looked at the eyes and said, "I'm not you." *I have to get out of here.*

Sabine picked up her cell phone and dialed June's number. "I'm going to the beach. You and the kids want to meet me there?"

1982

Sabine

Emily and I stood at the edge of the county road as Billy drove away. He'd offered to drive us to her back door, but we enjoyed the walk, especially in late afternoon. After we took baths and ate leftovers, we were seated at the kitchen table,

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when I asked, “Was Josephine surprised Billy’s back? Was it hard to convince her about him moving in?” I didn’t expect her to tell me exactly how Josephine had answered. I thought Ms. Emily might have been careful when she told us the news because she wanted to protect Billy’s feelings and probably mine too.

Emily rolled her eyes and said, “I’d decided I would let Billy stay here with me if Josephine didn’t agree, but I’m so glad she was willing, because I really like the thought of you having someone else in that house with you, Sabine.”

“It’ll be like a different place,” I said. “It’s cleaned and fresh. Having a big brother there will be nice. It’ll be a happy place.” I didn’t mention that she hadn’t answered my questions.

“I suppose places can be happy,” Emily said. “People are happy. You and Billy will be the happiness.” She forced a smile and didn’t say anything about Josephine’s madness. We avoided talking about what Josephine might be like when she returned. Maybe she would try at first. I knew Josephine, and her trying didn’t last long. But, I didn’t want to think too much about what could go wrong.

We could spit and polish all we wanted, but there was something dark around the Dunn house that would leak in again, like a stain we couldn’t wash out. Ms. Emily and I could hide the tarnishes. However, they would resurface. I knew that in my

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bones. Imperfections always returned to the Dunn place. If Billy was there, we could deal with whatever happened together. My bones told me that Billy's return wasn't because he was imperfect.

I had trouble falling asleep again. I thought about what the Dunn place would be like with Billy. I wasn't worried. Excitement kept me from falling asleep. It would be hard to concentrate in school the next day. I didn't want to be caged inside the building. It was the last week of classes. If I was going to skip fifth grade, made perfect sense to me that I could skip the last week of fourth grade.

When I finally drifted off, I had a dream. I walked down the cattle trail road with Remy by my side. I ran when people called my name. Heading toward the voices, I could see Josephine, Billy, and a man I couldn't recognize, standing in the back driveway. I stopped running because I wasn't getting any closer.

A strong wind blew, and heavy rain pelted me as I hunkered on the cattle trail. The warm air swirled like the tropical storms that popped up in the Gulf and hung on the coast, causing a shower that felt neither clean nor refreshing, heavy. I couldn't see the house. My feet were covered in sticker burrs. I sat on the road, struggling to pick off the thorny, bright green spikes, the water all around me not even softening the pricks. The more I picked, the more there were, sticking into my thumbs and

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fingers. Even the sharp drops of rain felt like the spikes on the burrs. Remy barked a warning. My heart pounded. I stood to run, but my legs wouldn't move. The burrs dug into my ankles. I woke as my heart pounded and tears stung my eyes.

As I turned on the lamp beside the bed, I scanned the room to remind myself where I was. It was still strange to wake in Ms. Emily's house. After a while, I remembered the events of the day. Turning the light off and crawling deeper under the covers, I focused on my breath, breathing in the positive and out the negative until I was asleep again.

I awoke in the morning ready to get to school, if that's where I must be, only so I could come home to Billy and the Dunn place.

Time passed in slow motion as I sat in my school desk. The bus ride home took forever. I had a note from my teacher in my backpack, inviting Emily to an assembly on Friday afternoon. The ceremony would recognize the outstanding students for the year. Emily was encouraged to attend. I assumed that meant I might get an award. I couldn't have cared less. Focused on the end of the school year, I wanted to move on as soon as possible. Recognition embarrassed me. I didn't want anyone looking at me or talking about me. By reputation, I was the strange girl who'd vomited on the table at the restaurant. I wanted to forget everything about elementary school.

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I considered throwing the note away. Assemblies seemed like what Josephine would call *bull shit*. In my opinion, they were devised for ambitious parents. Well, I didn't have an ambitious parent who gave a hoot about anyone, and Josephine gave the public school system an F+ in their ability to meet the needs of all students, including herself.

My presence at such a farce was for a bunch of other people, but not for me, *so what's the point?* I blamed the school for my isolation, but the problem was actually Josephine. She would have talked for days about the note in my backpack. I could hear what Josephine would probably say about that. "Fuck 'em. I'm not interested." I had to admit I agreed with Josephine.

When the bus stopped at the end of Emily's drive, I got off and waited until the thing rolled away before I strained to see into the driveway of the Dunn house. Billy's car and a truck I hadn't seen before were barely visible through the trees. I ran toward Emily's to put my things up, so we could go across the road and see what was going on.

Emily waited at the kitchen table with a snack of green grapes. She folded the newspaper she'd been reading and said, "Welcome home, Sunshine." She said that every day. "Have a snack, then we'll go over and see how Billy and Jared are getting along with the painting. Jared helped Billy move his things in today. They have spring training football practice later

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on, so they thought they could get the ceiling done before they had to go. They're just the best. Do you have much homework?"

Emily was in a great mood. She always had a positive attitude, but Billy being back, made her almost giddy. I was happy for her. Not much happened on our stretch of the county road to give someone good feelings. Maybe he reminded her of her dead son, Matthew.

"I had some reading in history to do, but I did it on the bus. We turn in our books tomorrow. I'm supposed to study some spelling words, but I can spell them all, no problem. We're not doing much in class this week." I was so excited about getting to the Dunn house, I could barely enjoy the snack. Being away from the house at school all day made me think I'd missed something.

Emily told me something else. She said, "Sabine, I called the social worker today to tell her about Billy coming back and all the things we're doing to get the house together. She'll come over and meet him sometime and see the house. I thought I should tell her before she heard from someone else. I think it's best to keep her informed about what's going on."

I sensed Ms. Emily had some concern about the social worker's opinions. I hoped there would be no problems about Billy returning home. Just when I got my hopes up, there would be another worry. I couldn't stand to think that someone else

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could step in and make a decision that could take the control away from me and Ms. Emily. Remy's ghost nose nudged the back of my leg.

Ms. Emily and I walked to the Dunn house with a bowl of green grapes and a bag of home-made chocolate chip cookies. The odor of fresh paint, furniture polish and lavender mingled in the back hall. Ms. Emily put the snacks on the kitchen table. As we approached the staircase, there were two suitcases and a couple of boxes inside the door of the downstairs parlor, Marvin's old room. It made my heart jump. This is really happening.

I had a fleeting thought that Marvin could slip into the house at any time and reclaim his old room. The notion sent chills down my arms. I envisioned him coming through the front door, like he owned the place. As I mounted the staircase, music played.

When Ms. Emily and I reached the top of the stairs, Billy and Jared had finished painting the ceiling in my room. They gathered empty paint cans with dried paint dripping down the outside and collected the newspapers that had protected the wood floor. Jared saw us first, and he broke into a wide grin. "Here are the womenfolk, Billy," he said, speaking over the music playing on a radio. "They've come to inspect our work." Billy stooped to turn the radio off.

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“You pass with flying colors.” Emily giggled. “We left a snack in the kitchen for you two. This looks great, doesn’t it, Sabine?”

“Yeah! I’ll have sweet dreams in this room. Thank you. I saw your stuff downstairs, Billy. Are you moved in?”

“Yep,” he said. “That’s the total of all of my belongings. I’ll spend the night here tonight. I’m going by the store on my way home from football and pick up some coffee, milk and cereal.”

“This is so exciting,” Emily said. “I’ll put the sheets on the bed downstairs and clean the bathroom for you Billy.”

“You don’t need to do all that Ms. Emily,” Billy said. “I can make a bed and clean the bathroom. I’ve been looking out for myself for a long time.”

“I can vouch for that,” Jared said. “He does hospital corners and everything. He’s a regular drill sergeant when it comes to makin’ a bed.”

“While Jared is here with me, show us the furniture you’d like us to move downstairs.” Billy pushed crumpled newspapers into a garbage bag.

We agreed the third chest from the dormitory bedroom would be a good entry piece. I inspected all the drawers, looking for more hidden notes. We chose a rolled oriental rug from the foyer, a hat and coat stand, and a lamp from one of the front bedrooms. Ms. Emily carried the coat stand and handed me a

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footed china bowl. She pointed out a mirror that could be hung over the chest.

Billy and Jared unrolled the floral rug in my room before going downstairs to enjoy the snack. We chatted at the kitchen table, and then Emily and I told the boys goodbye as they rushed out the back door to football practice.

Upstairs, after they'd left, Emily and I admired the rug in my room. We moved the few pieces of furniture that we'd left in the foyer. I set one of the lamps on a chest and turned it on. Ms. Emily beamed at me in the glow of the lamplight.

"Wow," I said. "This looks so nice. I can't wait to live in here."

"Won't be long," Emily said, scanning the room. "I have to admit, this looks even better than I anticipated. Let's bring in the rocker and floor lamp."

When all the pieces had been moved in except the bed, Emily said, "Woohoo." She did her victory dance. "We'll get Billy to help us get the rest of the furniture set up sometime this week. I know this is the last week of school, Sabine, and you probably have a lot to do."

"This is all I want to do," I said. "I'll be glad when school is out, and we can spend more time with my room and Billy." Ms. Emily put her arm around me and squeezed.

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We went downstairs, peeking into Marvin's old room. The folded sheets were left on the bed so Billy could make it himself with hospital corners. Emily had cleaned the bathroom before, so it really didn't need much more.

Ms. Emily said, "Hey, Sabine, come here and look at this and see what you think." She stood with her hand on her hip, facing the open linen closet in the bathroom.

"There's enough clean towels to get Billy through a couple of days. You see this cabinet here?" Ms. Emily proposed a renovation to add a washer and dryer inside the house. She laughed out loud and said, "I chatted with Josephine about the need for a laundry room. She said she couldn't tolerate any workers inside the house and if there was any remodeling, it needed to be completed before she gets home. If we're going to get it done, we need to get on it. I consider this improvement would be something to help with the cleanliness of the house. I think her attorney would agree."

Ms. Emily's description was vivid. It was a great idea. I had no idea what an attorney would have to do with it. "I'd love this, but Josephine will never agree to it. She wouldn't even call a plumber. She *does* hate having workers in the house."

"Yes, I know she does. I do have leeway here though, and Josephine says she'd prefer that any work be done while she's

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away. I need to get her attorney's approval to release funds, but I think I'm going to suggest this idea."

I was stumped by what Ms. Emily was talking about. That's the second time she'd mentioned an attorney, and I had no idea Josephine had an attorney or that there was money anywhere to do any work. Attorneys were for if you were in trouble. Yes, we could clean, but Ms. Emily seemed to be going beyond sweeping and washing linens. "Josephine doesn't have the money."

"Don't worry yourself about that, Sabine. Money isn't a kid's problem." She walked off and went to the kitchen to get the grape bowl. My opinion really hadn't mattered.

We crossed the road to Emily's house. The days were getting longer. It would be light for a while. I stayed outside and played in a swing hanging from an oak tree in the backyard, while Emily went inside to make tuna salad for dinner. I liked Emily's tuna salad with celery, apples, pecans, mayonnaise, and boiled eggs. I knew exactly how long to boil an egg.

I twirled myself around in the tree swing, thinking about Remy and how the dog would have enjoyed knowing Billy. I watched the dirt fly under my feet when the ropes began to uncoil and twist me the opposite direction. I threw my head back and watched the white clouds zoom around in the blue sky. The twirling made me dizzy.

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Ms. Emily said not to worry about money, but it seemed to me that was a big worry. Dizzy kept me from worry for a short while.

When I was tired of swinging, I watched some ants carrying cut leaves and crape myrtle blossoms down a hole. I sat on the ground and poked at the line of ants with a stick. They kept marching around any obstacle I put in their way, carrying the pieces of leaves and purple blossoms above them. The rhythm of the vibrating track of bright blossoms created a jagged line leading to their hole to the underground.

“What’s it like down there?” I whispered to the marching trail. “Do you know you’re home there, saying hello to your ant friends?” Tenacious. Ants are tenacious, a word I went back to several times in the dictionary. I couldn’t pick out one ant not worthy of the word. There wasn’t one Josephine among the ant colony. Of course, the queen probably isn’t marching in this line.”

Emily called me in for dinner as the sun threw longer shadows across the yard. It was the time of day when everything quieted. I imagined Rita Dawson’s guineas grumbling and muttering.

When I entered the kitchen, Emily had filled glasses with milk and set them at our places. The room smelled of the toast for our sandwiches. I washed my hands at the kitchen sink and

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sat at the table, smoothing the cloth napkin in my lap with both hands.

Emily sat opposite me. “I saw the note in your backpack Sabine. I’m looking forward to going to that assembly. Would you like to get a new outfit?”

“No way,” I said, drawing back from the table. “I don’t really even want to go to that thing. It’s not for me. It’s for the school to get parents to come and sit in the auditorium.”

“Now Sabine, I think it’s an honor to be invited. I know how you are about people paying attention to you, but this is a special occasion. I think you should let me *and Billy* celebrate your success.”

I hadn’t considered Billy going to the assembly. I would have to think about it. It made my stomach drop to have to sit in an auditorium full of people.

The social worker would visit the following week. She would meet Billy and see the changes to the house. I hoped she’d think the house could be a place for new life. Surely, the social worker would agree the place was cleaner, better. Billy was one of the best things that had ever happened to me or our house. Surely the social worker would notice. *Surely she would?* Her visit was on my mind, cluttering my thoughts along with the silly ceremony at the school.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BILLY SLEPT EVERY night at the Dunn place. I was thrilled he lived there. Emily and I invited him to dinner with us on a night he wasn't at practice.

On Wednesday dinner at Ms. Emily's, Billy said, "Sabine, Ms. Emily told me about the assembly on Friday and I plan to go. I have a decent outfit and I'll be there. I'll comb my hair nice and everything. I expect you to be there too."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. He looked perfectly fine with messy hair. "They can mail a certificate, or we can pick it up when we go to town for groceries."

Billy shot Ms. Emily a look. "Yeah, but that wouldn't be much fun, and I want to see you and your friends enjoying the last day of school. I remember those days. You'll miss your buddies this summer."

Ms. Emily cleared her throat. "It will be a nice afternoon and I'm looking forward to it also, sweetie."

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Ms. Emily didn't want to say the truth, but I did. "I don't have any friends, Billy, and I'm counting on being at a different school and not having to see *any* of those people this summer. You and Ms. Emily don't understand, for me, it's *torture* to even have to go to that building this week. I don't want you to have to dress and comb your hair. I like you the way you are."

Billy set his fork down and gave me a serious look. "Okay, I get it. I'm your older brother and I would like to see you at the awards assembly. Could you do it for me and Ms. Emily?"

I leaned forward with my jaw set and my lips pursed. I stared into Billy's eyes without breaking a smile. "I said it would be torture. You know I would do anything for you and Ms. Emily." I looked down at my plate. "If you really want me to be tortured, I guess I can do it, but I won't be happy about it."

"I think you're being over dramatic, Sabine," Billy said.

"What you think and what I know are not the same, Billy. I'm done talking about this."

So, that's how Ms. Emily tricked me into attending the awards assembly.

Ms. Emily had been home during the week when I got off the bus each day. She worked on drapes for my room. They were the ones salvaged from the living room. She'd cut them to fit and sewed ties on the top to hang from a large rod that Billy would paint and mount.

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Emily put me off with various excuses when I'd asked to go work on my room. "After school is out for the summer, Sabine," She'd insisted. "We'll have plenty of time to get all our projects finished. Be patient. It'll be there when you get out for the summer. Let's just get through this week. I want to get this sewing done."

Emily also worked on needlework while she watched television. She didn't offer to show me, as she usually did, and I didn't ask, mainly because I was still mad about the stupid assembly. I was preoccupied, looking forward to the end of school and spending the summer with Billy. I was irritated with Emily for not letting me go to the Dunn house. I was bored. Nothing was happening like I wanted it to.

The assembly was a waste of time. It was held right after school. Emily and Billy sat in the audience. My teacher asked me to sit on the front row. She said my name would be called to come to the stage at some point during the program. I told myself I could do this one little thing for Billy and Ms. Emily. Other students who would receive awards were seated around me. They talked among themselves. I couldn't think of a thing to chat with them about. I just wanted to go home.

I glanced to Emily and Billy seated several rows behind me on the aisle. They waved, but I shrugged and smirked so they'd know I was still ticked about being there. Emily had taken extra

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time to French braid my hair that morning. My fat backpack stuck out under my seat, full of everything I'd cleaned out of my desk. Mrs. Timmons suggested I take the backpack to Emily so no one would trip on it when they were called to the stage. That description gave me the picture in my brain that I would be the one falling over it, so, I dragged it from under the chair and walked a few rows back. Eyes followed me up the aisle to Billy's seat at the end of the row. I imagined myself handing the backpack to him and continuing to the exit. He held his hand out and said, "I'll hold that for you, Sabine. You look real pretty today."

"Thank you" I couldn't recall anyone ever saying that to me. I felt a little better about walking back down the aisle. I suppose he knew a nice comment would save him from me throwing my backpack at him. I had been grumbling about the assembly since our dinner on Wednesday evening.

"Is that your brother?" The girl seated next to me turned to look at Billy when I got back to my seat.

"Yes, that's my brother, Billy. He's in high school."

The girl took another look. "He's cute."

I nodded. "Yeah. Sometimes he's nice too." I stared at the stage, but she continued to look at Billy.

The assembly was boring, a waste of time. I wondered how the auditorium full of people managed to sit through it. I was

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given the award for the most outstanding fourth grade student. I got a little plaque and a certificate. It was all I could do to get myself to the stage as my heart pounded.

At the end of the program, the principal announced a very special award for the outstanding student for the entire elementary school. “This year this award will go to a fourth grade student who will be moving off our campus and into the sixth grade next year.”

My face flushed with heat, and my heart pounded faster and louder than before. My palms oozed a clammy sweat and my ears rang. I tried to clear my head so I could hear when the principal called the name. The feeling in my stomach could be vomit. I panicked. Stories about me upchucking on the stage would surely make it to the middle school. I closed my eyes against the image of the meal I’d shared at Sunday lunch with Mrs. Lawson.

The *superintendent* took over and continued, “This special student has scored high enough to skip the fifth grade and we are very happy to present this award to”—he waited a ridiculous amount of time— “Sabine Nadine Cole.” He pronounced my first and middle names wrong, *Sadine Nabine*. I guess he couldn’t screw up Cole.

Everyone stood and applauded. I struggled to stand and walked to the stage as if I was trudging through a thick fog. I

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accepted the award. I watched my hands reaching out through the fog that seeped into my brain. Mr. Renfro's fingernails were shiny on his fingers curled around a white and gold trophy. I was clumsy, nauseated, and trembling.

I don't know how I got back to my seat. Some of the other recipients, seated around me, patted my back with congratulations as Mr. Renfro's voice droned. *No one should be surprised like this.* It was not a comfortable feeling. I would have given the award to anyone else, not to have to experience the nausea. What was this for anyway? I wasn't impressed by it. What I did took no effort. I took tests after sitting in the principal's office most of the day.

People stood and chatted, a humming with no words marked the end of the assembly. We were free to go. Some paused to congratulate me as I made my way to Emily and Billy, slightly relieved the ordeal was over. I couldn't make myself pretend it was pleasant. Ms. Emily had tears in her eyes and hugged me. I still trembled and resented that she and Billy had insisted on attending.

Billy stood in the aisle, grinning, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his khakis. A group of giggling girls looked over their shoulders at me when I stopped beside him, and he put his arm around me.

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“Hey, kid, you need a wheelbarrow for all those awards?” He squeezed my arm. “Good work! You must be the smartest person in the family.” He dipped his head and whispered next to my ear. “Thank you for doing this for Ms. Emily. She’s so proud of you and so am I.”

Ms. Emily turned to us from a conversation with a friend and said, “Let’s go out to celebrate. You name the place, Sabine! This is your day.”

I took a deep breath. They were excited and asked too many questions, but I needed to catch my breath and slow my heartbeat. I was still nauseated, not hungry. Eating in a restaurant was the last thing I wanted. None of this hoopla was about me. That dawned on me when I looked into Ms. Emily’s and Billy’s faces. No, this wasn’t about me. All I could think of was Billy’s favorite place for burgers. So, I said *Nate’s*.

“Cheeseburgers it is,” Emily said in a voice that sounded like she’d just hit bingo. “He has the best onion rings in the world.” Each mention of the greasy, fried food made my stomach lurch.

We left the auditorium as the crowd thinned. Billy led the way, carrying my backpack to his car, and opened the back door for me. Ms. Emily sat in the front passenger seat. I sat with my face in the open window, hoping the breeze could bring my heartbeat back to normal. My bulging backpack and a pile of

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awards took up the rest of the seat. I only wanted to dump all those things in the nearest trash bin. There were no memories of elementary school that I wanted to keep, none. I'd expected Billy to get that, even if Ms. Emily couldn't.

They chatted and laughed in the front seat while my forehead continued to sweat and my heart raced. Couldn't Billy remember what it was like at school when he lived with Josephine? Was it the same for him? If it *had* been, he wouldn't have insisted I go to that assembly. This sweaty, heart-beating, stomach-flipping feeling that I had no control over is not worth the storm of excitement and surely shouldn't be followed by food.

Now, here I was, the center of attention, but wanting none of it. I was the sourpuss, the kid everyone coaxed to smile and celebrate. If they could feel my insides—I took a deep breath and exhaled into the breeze. *Do it for them, Sabine. Just make yourself do it.*

Nate's Burgers and Shakes did have good onion rings. I picked at the food, because the aroma from the deep fryers and my continued nausea made me skittish of eating too much. Billy saw a few people he knew from high school. He introduced me as his sister and the *star* of the elementary assembly. I forced myself to smile. It was kind of fun to see Billy with his friends

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and how easily he chatted with them. Ms. Emily glowed, doting on Billy and beaming at me.

Billy said, “Well, Ms. Emily, don’t you think it’s about time we headed home and showed Sabine her surprise?” He must have ignored the uneaten food on my plate.

I squinted at him. “What are you talking about?”

Emily raised her brows and said, “Why, Billy, I think you’re more excited about this surprise than I am, and I can hardly wait.” She got up from the table, held her hands over her head and did her victory dance right there in public. Come on Sabine. You’ll see when we get there.”

I was relieved to head home, but I don’t like surprises. Billie and Ms. Emily created too much attention. As soon as we walked into the fresh air, the nausea was gone. It had been exhausting to force a smile and accept unwanted congratulations. However, Billy and Ms. Emily were still riding high with excitement. They were supposed to be my favorite people, but they really plucked my nerves.

We headed home in Billy’s car. I’d ridden in the car from the auditorium to Nate’s, but I’d been distracted. He drove with all the windows down, the wind blowing into our faces again. We listened to Michael Jackson on the radio. The words of *Man in the Mirror* meant something to me. All the feelings

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distracting me before, were gone. Finally, I leaned over the seat and asked, “Where did you get this car, Billy?”

He turned the radio down and said, “It belonged to my Dad. June and I divided up his stuff after he died, and I took this car. It’s been a good one. I drove it most of the time anyway when he was sick, so June didn’t mind.”

“Where is June?” Emily asked, and then “Do you ever talk with her?”

“We haven’t stayed in touch like I thought we would. She headed to Louisiana with her boyfriend, said she was going to enroll in college and maybe get married. Neither one of us had a phone number to give the other, so we haven’t talked. I think she might have your number, Ms. Emily. She mentioned it once. I told her I planned to be at the Dunn house. She said she had that number. She was a drama queen there at the end.”

I gasped, “Drama queen is what I called Josephine sometimes.”

Emily sighed. “Well, I hope she makes her way back here someday or lets us know how she’s doing. I’d love to see her.”

When we pulled into the driveway, the lights were on in my bedroom upstairs. Now, I suspected the surprise might have something to do with my room. Maybe Emily had been keeping me from the Dunn house for a reason.

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Billy opened the back door of the house for us and said, “I wish we had a red carpet for the star of the evening. Enter, madam, and follow me.”

Emily giggled and said, “I can’t wait.”

I still cringed at the attention. All of my expressions and words had to be forced.

The addition of the Oriental rug gave the back hall a homey, warm feeling. A framed mirror hung above the recently waxed chest, and a brass lamp cast a warm glow over the fresh foyer. A footed China bowl sat under the lamp and Billy dropped his keys there, then held his arms out, motioning me to the stairs.

I followed him through the house and up the curved steps of the staircase. But, I was anxious, sidetracked by the thought that we should have locked the back door. In the days before Josephine was carted off, anyone could walk into the house.

The upstairs foyer was lit, and the door to my room was closed. Billy stood in front of the door and said, “And now for the reveal. Sabine Nadine Cole, this is your life.”

I had a flashback to Mr. Renfro mispronouncing my name, met with giggles from some of the audience. If I had to return to elementary school, I would probably have been called *Sadine Nabine*.

Billy swung the door open, and every detail of the room had been finished. It was better than I could have imagined. A small

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vase full of pencils and pens sat beside a box of notecards and a journal on the round oak table. My attention had gone straight to those little things. I ran my fingers over the diary after flipping through the blank pages. *Now I have a place to write my dreams.* Every small thing would be useful. Ms. Emily and Billy knew me. She'd actually listened every time I'd described what I liked.

The day bed, perfectly positioned under the windows, was mounded with plush pillows and a beautiful, crocheted throw. I glanced at Ms. Emily, and she nodded. "You made these, didn't you?" I said.

"Yes, I did. There's love in every stitch," she said holding her fingers to her lips.

We chuckled at Ms. Emily's emotion, and I appreciated that she meant exactly what she'd said. I ran my palm across the spread on the double bed. The patchwork quilt had been folded down to expose a beautiful, white sheet with wide tatted edging. I could see myself napping on that bed, under that throw, on a rainy day, a far cry from the musty crib mattress on the junk porch.

Billy pointed to a radio and a tape player for music on the top of one of the chests. "This is a gift from me and Ms. Emily for your promotion to sixth grade.

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“Thank you.” My voice cracked as a lump formed in my throat. I’d never imagined *my own room with music*.

A vase of zinnias, roses, ivy and rosemary, flowers and herbs from Ms. Emily’s garden, sat in the middle of the chest. The fragrances of the herbs and flowers wafted around the pressed-glass spooner, one of Ms. Emily’s garage sale bargains. The colors of the flowers were in the other details of the room: pillows, drapes, China, throws. Everything was perfect.

My eyes fell on the windows again. There was a bright red-orange sunset across the pasture. Every pair of windows was covered with roll-up bamboo shades, raised to the tops of the casings and framed by the drapes that Ms. Emily had tailored. The damask fabric was the perfect shade of pale gold. My breath caught because the sunset reminded me of Billy. Now, it occurred to me, my room faced west, the *end* of the day, the end. Maybe—should I have chosen an east-facing room? I didn’t want anything to end.

It wasn’t late, but I could imagine crawling under the covers and falling asleep. The room was comfortable and full of all my favorite things. I couldn’t wait to be able to sleep there. *Will that ever happen?* Something has to begin before it can ever *end*. Thoughts interrupted me taking in all the small features of the room.

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On the wall beside my closet door was the dresser with the long mirror. It had been repainted a pale blue with flowers vining around the drawers and mirror. I'd never dreamed the worn, yellowing piece could have been painted to look so pretty. The mirror reflected my entire body. Small picture frames with photos of Emily and Billy topped the dresser.

"Is that not the most beautiful piece of furniture you've ever seen?" Ms. Emily said. "Billy painted that just for you." She tilted her head with her hands clasped in front of her, admiring the dresser.

"Really? I didn't know you could paint like that Billy. It's beautiful. I love it. Thank you."

Emily opened the drawers to show me there were new pajamas and underwear, absorbing the scent of the lavender drawer liner.

"I have one more surprise. Follow me." Billy bounded down the stairs and went into the kitchen and grabbed a bag before walking out the back door. Ms. Emily and I hurried to catch up, as she giggled. He went straight to a group of weathered Adirondack chairs circled around a hole in the ground with logs in it. He struck a match and started a small bonfire. He had long sticks set up beside the fire pit. He stuck marshmallows on the ends of the sticks and passed them to Ms. Emily and me

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“When the fire dies down a bit and there are spots of glowing coals, it will be time for s’mores,” he announced. “Dessert will soon be served.”

I giggled along with Ms. Emily this time. Billy was going out of his way to make the night special. We toasted marshmallows and mashed them between graham crackers lined with chocolate bars. They were sticky, sweet, and delicious. My appetite had returned. There was no way to explain the feeling of being together. Ms. Emily’s and Billy’s faces glowed in the firelight. Gazing at them through the red sparks flying off the logs, I thought of them as my angels, framed in the light. I was glad I’d pushed myself through the assembly, but I didn’t want to experience that panicky feeling again.

We ate our fill and sat staring into the dying flames. I thought about Billy and riding in his car with the windows down and how his dad died of cancer. I wondered. “How did your dad get the cancer, Billy?”

Billy leaned forward and twirled a stick around in the flames, burning off the marshmallow residue. He never hesitated at my out-of-the-blue questions.

“During the 1960s and ’70s a lot of people were sent to Vietnam to fight in a war. My dad went to fight in the same year June was born. He was a young man then. He came back, but he had problems.” Billy stood and nudged a log with his booted-

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toe. “My dad had flashbacks, and he suffered from diabetes and leukemia. He believed his illnesses were a result of exposure to Agent Orange.” Billy stared into the fire.

I asked, “What’s Agent Orange?”

He glanced over to me with a rare, unsmiling face. “It was a defoliant that the U. S. Army sprayed on the forests in Vietnam and Laos to clear vegetation. It killed crops and jungle plants. It was meant to run the people into the cities, forced urbanization, they called it.”

“Is that what caused the cancer?” I said.

“In a round-about way. Yes.” Billy said, “Dad loaded Agent Orange onto the helicopters that sprayed it on the crops and forests in Vietnam. It’s complicated. The Agent Orange had been contaminated.” Billy sat. He sighed, twirling a long branch in the fire.

“My dad served this country, but he was also a victim. He cared about the Vietnamese. He was involved in a helicopter crash and then there was ground fighting. That’s all he would tell us about the combat. Something must have happened, something violent, because he had so many flashbacks.”

“That’s just about the saddest thing I’ve ever heard,” Ms. Emily said. “My son, Matthew, was killed in Vietnam. I don’t think you ever met him, Billy. I was devastated, but I was proud of him for serving. How come I forgot all about that defoliation?”

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Billy sighed again, “There were many protests about the war in the sixties, according to what I’ve read. It’s depressing.”

Emily sniffed and wiped her cheek. “We’re all connected, I like to say, and we’ve made this world so complicated with religion and politics that it’s hard to ferret out the culprits from the heroes.” She threw her stick into the dying fire and the faint flame grew. “Talk of war is getting me a little depressed on this day of celebration. I’ve never had a sentimental or romantic notion of war. I hate it. It’s always a bad deal. Can we change the subject?”

“Sure,” Billy said. “Let’s finish this conversation later, Sabine. Anyone want another s’more?”

It had been a strange day, but Billy’s story about his dad was disturbing. I wanted to study more on the war and find out what the heck happened. I knew two people, people close to me, and they’ve both lost someone in the same war.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WE SAT BY the fire until it smoldered to nothing, then Billy doused the embers with water. As the ash-filled smoke rose to the sky, he walked Ms. Emily and me down the drive toward the county road.

“How do you like sleeping in the Dunn house, Billy?” I asked. Although I’d slept there many times by myself, it never occurred to me to be spooked. I wasn’t worried about the ghosts. It was Josephine’s friends who worried me.

“It’s great! I sleep like a baby all night. Can I walk you back across the road?”

“We’re fine, Billy,” Emily said. “I have a flashlight in my bag, and I left the porch lights on.”

“Y’all sleep tight. See you in the morning. Ms. Emily has invited me over for pancakes, kid, before I go to work.”

“Pancakes!” I whooped. “Woohoo! Good night, Billy. See you in the morning. And, uh, Billy. Lock the doors.”

“Okay, I will. Let me walk you home,” Billy said again.

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“Absolutely not,” Emily insisted. “You go on in and get ready for bed. We can make our way. We did this many times before you showed your handsome face around here.”

Ms. Emily shone a flashlight beam ahead of us on the dirt road. I worried that one of Josephine’s old friends might walk into the Dunn house, maybe even Marvin. The guy speeding down the road in the silver truck worried me too. For some reason, he’d bothered Marvin. I knew Marvin would come back. I just didn’t know when he would return.

The edges of the light moving the shadows as we walked, gave the woods an eerie feel. The light showing our way, created shadows on the boundaries of the path. The feeling reminded me of the night the coyotes howled in the distance as I trudged home from the Dawsons’ with Remy. The pleasant leaves by day became a spooky cave of darkness after sunset. In the dark, the words echoed in my head. Everything is dark and unknown after sunset.

I should have picked an east-facing room.

Ms. Emily kept up the conversation on the walk. “Billy and I were so proud of you today, Sabine. The principal said some very nice things, and you looked so poised up on that big stage.”

“Thank you, and thank you for all the work you did on my room. I can’t wait until I can sleep there. It’s the best room I’ve ever seen.” My breath caught. “Oh, I left my backpack in Billy’s

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car.” I’d also forgotten to thank him again for all the work he’d done and my gift. I wanted to run back across the road.

“You can get it tomorrow. You deserve that room, sweet child.” Ms. Emily hugged me, and then she held her nose. “We smell like smoke. It’s bath time and then to bed for both of us. It’s been a long day, and I need my beauty sleep if I’m going to make pancakes in the morning.”

It was late spring, muggy and humid. Even the evening was warm and sticky. I looked forward to washing away the smoke and sticky sweetness of the weather and dessert. Maybe I could wash away elementary school and the worry about Billy forgetting to lock the door and me forgetting to thank him again.

The next morning at the kitchen table, I said. “Thank you. My room is beautiful and now I’ll have music there.”

“You’re welcome, Sunshine,” Ms. Emily said raising her coffee cup as a toast.

Billy nodded, unable to talk until he swallowed a mouthful of pancakes. “You deserve a special room, kid, and I’m thrilled to have you as my new and favorite younger sister. It will be fun working on that old house together and the yard.”

The social worker, Ms. Wilson, came the next week. She talked with Billy and me separately, and then we gave her a tour of the house together. She liked my room and how Emily and I

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had cleaned and spruced up the place. I saw the rooms differently as Ms. Wilson commented on the drastic changes.

She talked with Emily by herself for a while, and then she left. Ms. Emily told me later that Ms. Wilson was impressed with Billy and planned to interview the football coach before giving her okay for me to move back into the Dunn house.

According to Ms. Emily, Ms. Wilson had two scholarships available for a summer camp, about two hours away, on the Trinity River. The session would last almost the whole month of July. There would be swimming, crafts, horseback riding, and fellowship with other kids. Both women thought it would be the perfect summer activity for me.

Camp sounded like torture, but Ms. Emily thought it would be a great opportunity. I said I'd think about it, only to postpone saying no. "I can't swim," I told Ms. Emily. "I've never been on a horse."

"That's all the more reason to go, Sabine," Emily insisted. "You can learn so many new things and come back and teach me a thing or two."

"What about all the stuff you have to have when you go to camp?" I argued. "I don't have all that camping stuff."

"Ms. Wilson says you will sleep in cabins," Emily said. "They have a list of supplies and those will be donated by a service club." Ms. Emily had an answer for every protest. It was

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already early June. Ms. Wilson wanted to know in the next week if I could attend. She told Ms. Emily she had a waiting list of kids who wanted to go. So if they *wanted* to go, why waste her breath on me? I didn't want to go.

After Billy got off work, Ms. Emily and I went to the Dunn house with a pound cake. Jared was there, and they were cleaning the upstairs bedroom that Billy wanted to move into. It was the room at the front of the house, facing east, on the opposite side of the foyer from mine. Billy liked it because it had a private bath, and the walk-through windows opened onto the front balcony. He and Jared had moved all the furniture out and wiped the wooden wainscoting with oil soap. It was a beautiful wood with detailed molding inset on each panel, topped by a carved chair rail.

Billy showed Ms. Emily and me the paint he planned to use on the wall above the wainscoting, a light ecru. Billy had scoured the attic and found a nice, big braided rug and some leather chairs that he and Jared had moved to the upstairs foyer, waiting to be staged in his room when the painting was finished.

Ms. Emily was excited. She told Billy to let her know if he needed anything, and she could make a list for garage sales. She mentioned the Pendleton blankets and fishing creels she'd spotted in the past.

Billy said, "Sabine, guess what else I found in the attic?"

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I couldn't even begin to guess. I'd never been in the attic.

"I found two bows, some arrows, and two quivers. I'm going to make us some targets up against those round hay bales in the back, and we can do archery."

"That's great," I said. "I've never done that before, but it sounds fun." I'd never thought about shooting a bow and arrow, but if Billy was going to do it, I thought it would be fun to learn. The bows had probably belonged to Old Dan, our grandfather and his younger brother, Ethan, when they'd lived at the Dunn house as boys.

We went downstairs, and Emily served the pound cake with glasses of milk. I told Billy and Jared about the summer camp Emily wanted me to go to, hoping they would beg me not to go, and they'd convince Emily it was a bad idea.

Billy disappointed me. "Never pass up an opportunity, Sabine. It's going to be hot in this old house this summer. You can be off having fun. I'll be working most of the time, so you might as well be doing something like that. I hope you do it. I never got to experience camp. I bet they teach you how to shoot a bow and arrow." I glanced at Emily to make sure she wasn't winking at him, encouraging him to agree with her.

"I know I don't get a vote in this, but I agree with Billy," Jared said. "I think camp sounds like fun. You think I'll fit in your bag?" We laughed at the thought of Jared folded up in a

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duffle bag. He flashed his huge, toothy grin and raised his eyebrows, chuckling and shaking his head in his easy way. Then he said, “Seriously, Sabine, lots of kids never get a chance to go to camp. You should go, then come back and tell us all about it. We can have a secondhand experience and enjoy it too. We’ll be here when you get back, waiting to hear about all the adventures you had with new friends.”

I stared at Jared’s face as he smiled, looking right into my eyes. He was almost pleading with me to take an opportunity he’d never been given. A secondhand experience, he’d said. He was talking about vicarious, a word I’d looked up. I could give him the experience he’d never had for himself. It wasn’t Emily’s or Billy’s flowery trickery that convinced me. I wanted to be able to tell Jared about camp.

I caved. “I guess it’s settled then, Ms. Emily. Sign me up with the state lady, and I’ll put on my goggles and nose plug and go to camp.”

Billy laughed, nearly spitting his milk across the table. He said, “Put on your flippers too, and send me a picture of that, Sabine. Oh, speaking of pictures, go check out your room before you leave. I put something in there for you. It was Jared’s idea after I told him about Remy. Ms. Emily put it together, and I put it in your room.”

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As soon as we finished tidying the kitchen, I ran up the stairs and into my room. The first thing I saw was a framed picture of Remy. It was a picture Ms. Emily had taken with a garage sale Polaroid camera, framed in one of her scavenged finds. It was perfect, sitting in the middle of the round oak table. I ran my fingers across the glass and looked at Remy's sweet face. I ached; I missed him so bad.

I ran downstairs and hugged Billy before we left. I hugged Jared too, because he'd had the idea for the picture.

When we returned to Ms. Emily's, she phoned the social worker to let her know I would attend camp. The next few days were filled with paperwork, a doctor's physical, and gathering the sundries on the list. The Lion's Club supplied the big items, like a sleeping bag, duffle bag, pillow, mosquito net, etc. By the time we had all the stuff together, Ms. Emily's front room was filled with my camp gear.

On the morning of July 2, Ms. Wilson arrived, and I was off to camp, where I would be until July 29, when the caseworker would deliver me back to Ms. Emily's. Billy and Ms. Emily waved me off. She cried, and he grinned from ear to ear.

I glanced over my shoulder as Ms. Wilson turned onto the county road. They were still there, waving. I held my hand up, but I couldn't wave. A flush of heat traveled down my chest and a sinking feeling hit my stomach. What if they're not here when

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I get back? What if something happens, something I could stop, if I were here? I closed my eyes. I'd never thought I could lose Remy, but he was gone. Why was I even leaving?

It was too late. All the stuff was packed in Ms. Wilson's car, and we were almost to the interstate. It would be a crazy Josephine move if I broke down and insisted on going back.

I didn't want to be like Josephine. I should have picked an east-facing room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sabine

1999

SABINE SAT ON the Bolivar beach, watching the kids build sandcastles. She and June were seated in beach chairs under a large umbrella. The waves pounding the shore and the salty spray misting their faces reminded Sabine of the days Billy and Jared would allow her to go to the peninsula with them. The biggest difference was she would return home with a sunburn. June had spent well over thirty minutes slathering everyone with coconut scented sunscreen. She was attentive, if not always understanding.

“I remember being that content to play in the sand,” Sabine said.

“We never went to the beach.” June squinted at the shore where her children ran toward the water to fill their sand buckets. “Josephine certainly never took us, and Dad never wanted to get

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very far from the house. He always feared a panic attack or whatever.”

Sabine sighed. She'd had plenty of experience with panic attacks. “I was lucky to have Billy and his friend, Jared. Even though they were popular teenagers, they usually included me on their trips to Bolivar, even for fishing. I was in awe of them. I knew it wasn't cool to have a pre-teen, awkward girl hanging around.”

“You still cling to that fantasy of a brother,” June said, taking a sip of diet soft drink.

“I'll never give up my adoration of Billy, June. He saved my life. I know he did. If he hadn't been there when Josephine came home from the hospital, I don't know what would have happened. It turned out it was bad enough with him there.” Sabine batted a beach ball that had escaped from one of the kids.

“You need to give Emily the credit there. She saved all of our lives and didn't take advantage of anyone.” June smoothed the hair strands that had escaped her ponytail and flew in front of her black, over-sized sunglasses.

“We'll never agree on Billy. He and Ms. Emily both deserve the credit, but he came exactly at the right time and brought me everything I needed.” Sabine took her sunglasses off and cleaned them with the corner of a towel. She narrowed her eyes at June. “I sometimes think about the risk Billy took to find me.

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Our reunion was magical. I was dancing and singing under the clothesline, trying to conjure some goodness to the Dunn house. I looked up, and there he was. Why are you so jealous of him?"

"I'm not jealous. I probably knew him better than anyone. I just don't get your devotion. He was a fantasy you invented, not real. Josephine even knew that." June scowled and sat up from the reclining chair. "Hey, you two, stop kicking that sand or we'll leave early." The kids turned to look at her, shrugged, and went back to the sandcastle.

Irritated about June's continued dismissal of Billy as a positive influence on her life, Sabine said. "Josephine didn't get to have an opinion about you or Billy. I didn't listen to her complaints. If she'd been a better mother, I would've had you my whole childhood. Either of you returning was a dream for me. Ms. Emily and I both considered it a miracle that either you or Billy might return. Just let me enjoy those memories."

"The thing is, you've created this fairytale about Billy that doesn't really exist. He's not the brother you pretend he is. Just be realistic. That's all I'm going to say about that." June took another swig of her soft drink and held the can to her cheek. "You're a functioning, productive, creative, beautiful adult, and I think you need to give yourself all the credit."

"And, you're the older sister who always insists on the last word. Okay. I know what you're talking about, but you know

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that the Billy I knew and the Billy you knew have nothing to do with one another. End of discussion. I'm going to add some character to the sandcastle." Sabine put her sun hat on and headed for the sand toys. Nothing June could say would change her mind about Billy.

Sabine

1982

Although I'd had my doubts, summer camp was fun. At first, I was worried, but no one knew me or my history. Most of the other campers looked nervous too. I recognized myself in their faces, their hesitancy to participate. There were a couple of days of stolen glances, awkward greetings, cautious sharing. Counselors held what they called, *ice breakers*, but most of us were still shy. Then suddenly, someone farted or spilled milk in the mess hall and everyone convulsed into laughter.

There was something about being with all those kids overnight and for every meal. The common areas and sharing chores, made me think the routine must be what living with siblings would've been like. Well, maybe not with Josephine. I had a lightbulb go on. I'd been comparing myself to adults, crazy, addicted, neglectful adults, and wondering what was wrong with me. Now I was living with the most accurate comparisons, and they all seemed to be normal and forgiving.

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All the kids seemed sympathetic, except one girl, Melanie. “Where’d you say you’re from? She stood over me, with her hands on her hips, as I finished my lunch in the dining hall.

I glanced up at her. “I don’t remember talking to you before, so I probably didn’t say where I was from.”

“Well, I think someone said you were from Bolivar. I know everyone in Bolivar. You don’t live there and you sure don’t go to school there.”

“Hm. I really don’t know anyone in Bolivar. I live on the mainland, far from where that school is. There are probably two or three schools between my house and Bolivar. You’re right. You wouldn’t know me.”

Amelia tugged my sleeve. “You finished? We need to get back to the cabin for afternoon check.” Amelia’s raised brows and smiled, let me know she was willing to give me an excuse to escape Melanie.

“Yep. I’m done.” I stood and picked up my tray. “Let’s go.” I didn’t look back to Melanie, but she stood at the end of the table and watched me. My heart raced. There was a slight chance she could know Josephine. There was a bait camp in Bolivar where she and Marvin used to go to drink and sit on the pier on the Intracoastal. I only knew about it from listening to their conversations. I planned to avoid Melanie. Her intentions weren’t friendly. I turned to Amelia. “Thanks.”

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“No problem,” Amelia said.

I met other girls I enjoyed being with, but Amelia was my best friend. We shared a cabin with two other girls. Amelia was my bunk mate. We’d hit it off immediately. “You’re funny,” I said only minutes after we’d met.

Amelia said, “Yeah, everyone says that.” She batted her red, almost invisible lashes. “But I want to be lovely.

I laughed. “Funny is lovely if you ask me.”

We held flashlights inside our sleeping bags during late night chats. Kids seemed different when we spent every hour together. We told each other things we probably wouldn’t reveal to our classmates, or kids in our hometowns, and we lied, or I did.

In the dark, in our own bunks, it was easier to talk about ourselves. I said, “My brother, Billy, drives a cool car. Sometimes he takes me out to eat with him and he knows all the high school kids in the restaurant. One time when I was talking to him, I accidentally spit on my arm, and he laughed so hard he couldn’t breathe.” I stared at the ceiling above my top bunk as I talked.

Amelia, in her bed below me, was quiet, and then said, sounding a little sad, “I have an older brother, but he never takes me out. He tells me to get lost if I interrupt him when he is with his friends. I think if I spit on my arm while I was talking he

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would say I was gross or something. Justin always closes his door when I go upstairs. He doesn't want me bothering him while he's in his room. Does your mother *make* your brother be nice to you?"

"No," I said, thinking Ms. Emily was as impressed by Billy's personality as I was. For the purpose of my discussions at camp, I didn't consider Josephine my mother. That was the lie part. "Ms. Emily thinks he has the best attitude. She's always telling me he's special and how she's impressed with the young man he is.

"You call your mother Ms. Emily?"

"Uh, yeah. It started out as a joke, because Emily is her first name. I'd been teasing her one day when I was in kindergarten. We called the teacher's helpers 'Ms. Whatever their first names were.' It stuck and I still do it. We both love Billy to death. Sometimes, I don't know what we would do if we didn't have him."

It was true. Ms. Emily and I were charmed by Billy and would be lost without him. And, now I knew how easy it was to slip when I told a lie. However, I don't think I'd ever be able to share the real story of my true mother and family.

"You're lucky, Sabine," Amelia said. "I wish my brother was easygoing and friendly like yours. What does he look like?"

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“He’s the most handsome boy I’ve ever seen,” I said without hesitation. “He’s tall and muscular and he grins all the time. You should see him dance. He cracks me up. He tells me he thinks I’m pretty. I’m sure he says that to make me feel better, because trust me, I know I’m not. He painted a dresser for my room as a surprise. It’s beautiful. I wish you could see it.”

I wished I’d brought a picture of Billy and Ms. Emily.

“I would wet my pants if my brother told me I was pretty.” Amelia snorted. Our cabin mates laughed too. We all giggled for a while. “He’s always telling me I should try to wipe my freckles off.” She was the funny girl everyone wanted to be around. Amelia made fun of herself and made us all feel at ease. She had no idea how cute she really was.

“Ha,” I laughed. “He’s just messing with you, Amelia. I’ve noticed that some boys make fun of girls when they don’t know what to say. Your brother’s probably one of those, worried about their reputation with their running buddies.”

“Well, I prefer your brother. I wish I could meet him, just to know what a nice brother looks like. I might cry myself to sleep.” Amelia pretended to sulk, and we giggled at her again.

I felt a little guilty, singing the praises of Billy to someone who was not having the same experience. I hoped Billy’s newness wouldn’t wear off.

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After breakfast the next morning, we listened to safety instructions by the pool, learned to keep our heads above water, and then we were able to canoe and kayak in the river. I couldn't believe I hadn't participated in such a thing before. Being on the water and outside was everything I loved. I learned to do flips, diving from a high platform.

I mastered swimming, progressed each day, especially in the river. We also learned to saddle the horses. After riding them on wooded trails, we'd return to the stables and groom our mounts. I fell in love with the chores in the stables. I couldn't wait to slip my hands into the curry combs and run them across the horses.

Creeping out of the cabin at night sometimes, I'd sneak to the stalls to talk to my new animal best friends. My dream would be to have horses at the Dunn place. They were magical, and their thoughts came to me with a flow, easier than even Remy's.

Every time I entered the stables I felt at home with the calming feeling the animals gave me. There were a couple of terriers there too. They seemed to love the horses as much as I did. They never barked, but got up from their sleep and ran to me, wagging their tails. The textures and aromas of leather relaxed me.

All the animals in the barn loved their jobs, especially being with the campers. I had the feeling I'd lived in that environment before. The only thing better would have been to have Remy

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with me. My cabin mates called me the horse whisperer. I enjoyed every chore, and even the aroma of manure was comforting.

Billy was right; we learned archery. At first, I had to wear a guard to keep the bow string from bruising the inside of my forearm, but when I got the hang of it, I got the highest scores in my group. The practice with Dale's slingshot, hurling rocks at the fence posts, had helped my control and aim.

At the end of camp, I was presented the Archery Achievement Award for the highest scores among all campers. I couldn't wait to challenge Billy. Although I worshiped him, I didn't mind competing with him and longed to best him at something. He enjoyed teasing and playing jokes on me. I couldn't outwit his pranks, but I might be able to out-shoot him.

We made clay projects in crafts class that we painted and then fired. I made Ms. Emily a pot for a plant and Billy a pencil holder. I pressed fern leaves in Ms. Emily's pot to make a design, and I carved Billy's initial on his.

In creative writing, I wrote Emily, Billy, and Jared notes describing how much they meant to me. I considered throwing them away, embarrassed by the words, but I thought about what it would mean to me to receive such a note, and I chose to keep them safe until I got home and then make a decision about

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sharing them. If I kept my mouth shut, I would be like Josephine, erasing herself.

When it was time to leave, my cabin mates and I cried and hugged. It was wonderful to have a good friend, finally. I wanted to take Amelia home with me and introduce her to Ms. Emily, Billy, and Jared. It would've been hard to explain why Ms. Wilson picked me up from camp, and my mother hadn't come to the closing ceremony, but Amelia didn't ask. We exchanged addresses and agreed to write each other. "I'm going to send you a picture of Billy," I promised.

"Yes, please do," Amelia said. "I want to see what a nice brother looks like."

I fell asleep, my head rested against the front passenger seat window, in Ms. Wilson's car, on the ride home. My cabin mates and I had stayed up talking the last night at camp. I was exhausted. I'd go back to camp if invited. But I hoped I wouldn't have a social worker next summer. If I did, that would mean Josephine was still crazy. It was almost the first time I'd thought of Josephine. I'd erased my mother from the camp experience, trying to create a different family to tell my new friends about. A few more weeks and she'll be home and then what?

When I woke, we were almost to the turn off for the farm-to-market road, which meant I had slept for almost two hours. I

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sat up and brushed my hair back from my face, rolled my stiff neck, and stared at the asphalt in front of the car.

The heat waves rippled off the road in the distance. It was a hot, dry, late July day. The cotton fields were thick with white balls, clustered in pods, full under dark green leaves. It wouldn't be long before big machinery invaded the fields to pick the soft puffs. I dreaded what would come before that, *defoliation*. That reminded me of Billy's dad.

I wondered if Agent Orange smelled like the chemical they sprayed from the crop dusters to defoliate the cotton before it was picked. It's not a natural stench; it's a chemical for the purpose of death, which must be why they call it herbicide. I recalled some of the other words in the dictionary: insecticide, homicide, suicide....

"A penny for your thoughts, Sabine?" Ms. Wilson said.

"Oh, I think about the weirdest things sometimes." I cleared my throat, unwilling to confess my sad thoughts, but I'd also conjured the taste of the death chemical. Ms. Wilson was probably used to weird kids, or maybe I was the weirdest.

"I was thinking about this cotton field. Things have changed since I left. The plants didn't even reach my ankles a few weeks ago." I wondered what else had grown while I'd been gone. "I had a good time at camp. Thank you for giving me the chance." I thought Billy would be proud of all of those words, and Ms.

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Emily would appreciate that my intention was genuine. But, it was true, even though I didn't want to go, I'm glad I did.

“That's good to hear, Sabine. It might be nice if you would write a note to the Lion's Club for sponsoring you. When people do something nice for you, they appreciate hearing if you enjoyed yourself.”

“I will. I should've thought of that for my creative writing class while I was there.” I sat up straighter when I saw the Dunn place in the distance. I couldn't tell if anyone was there when we drove by and pulled onto Ms. Emily's dirt road. As the car eased to a stop, Ms. Emily walked out the back door, drying her hands on her shirttail and smiling. The sight of her made me smile. I couldn't stop myself. I was glad to be home.

“Good heavens, Sabine, you're finally back. We have missed you so much.” She hurried down the steps and toward the car as I stepped out. She'd said *we*. Billy's still here.

“How tanned you are. You look like a movie star with that bronze skin and summer-lightened hair. I think you have grown a foot. Billy's going to be so glad to see you.” Ms. Emily stopped talking long enough to hug me.

Ms. Wilson had her trunk open, taking bags out and stacking them on the ground. There was a big pile there when Ms. Emily finally released me so we could help unload the trunk.

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“Dear Gussie,” Ms. Emily said. “I’d forgotten how much paraphernalia you had to take.”

Ms. Wilson said, “I can take the stuff that was donated to the camp storage facility.”

“That would be great,” Ms. Emily said. “If Sabine can’t use it again, it will be available for another camper.”

We helped the caseworker pack about half the pile back in her trunk. I thanked her again for the opportunity, and Ms. Emily and I waved as she backed down the drive and onto the dirt road.

“Come inside, Sabine, I’ve made a special dinner for tonight; Billy and Jared are coming over to have supper with us,” Ms. Emily said, as she helped me with my bags. “I am so glad you’re back. I’ve missed you so much. Billy’s been really busy and you’re going to like what he’s done over there. We’ll go over to see him after you get unpacked and rested.”

I entered the kitchen to the aroma of roasting beef and vegetables. “I slept almost all the way home,” I said. “I would like to brush my hair and get unpacked. I have something I made for you and Billy. Guess what?” I kept talking, not waiting for a guess, “I won the Archery Achievement Award! You were right, Ms. Emily, I learned to swim, and I’m good at it. I can do flips off the high board. I learned to saddle and ride a horse.

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When I start earning money, I'm going to buy a barn full of horses."

"I'm so glad you had a good time. Did you make new friends? I got the letters you sent, sounded like you were meeting people."

I told Ms. Emily about Amelia, my cabin mates, and staying up all night the last night. "I'm glad to be home. I missed you too and wondered what you all were doing. I have to send my new friend, Amelia, a picture of Billy. I'm sure you have one in that box of yours. She wants to see what a good brother looks like."

Ms. Emily giggled. "I suppose we can take a fresh picture, Sabine. Sounds like you enjoyed bragging about your brother. He deserves it. I won't argue about that. When you see what he's accomplished over at the Dunn place you will sing his praises again."

Ms. Emily poured me a glass of iced lemonade to sip while we unpacked my bags. We started a load of wash, and I gave Ms. Emily the clay pot I'd made. She had a plant handy to put in it and set it on the kitchen table as a centerpiece. I showed her the pencil caddy I'd made for Billy, and Ms. Emily put it in a gift bag with tissue around it so it wouldn't get broken. When I finished the lemonade, we walked over to the Dunn place with

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a brown paper bag full of apples and Billy's gift. I had all the notes I'd written in my pocket.

As we walked, I inhaled the scents of the road and trees that I'd missed. The grass that grew along the ditches had been freshly mown and clumped in sweating mounds. The sky was clear and bright, and the sun created heat on the top of my head and shoulders. A steady breeze from the southeast moved the tall grasses beyond the fence line, creating a ripple wave in the pasture. It was the same place I'd left weeks before, but it was different. I was different.

I was home, but that would change soon. Josephine would be back. Would she be different? Would she be happy with the changes? Would she be happy with Billy? How could anyone not be happy with him? I wanted all those things to be true for me, Josephine, and Billy.

Happy didn't ever last long at the Dunn house, even Marvin had figured that out. He would come back too. Sometime after Josephine came home, Marvin would show up. I knew that like I knew my own name. What I couldn't figure out was why he would only stay for a few minutes.

Even though I didn't like Marvin, he'd been the only one there with me the two other times Josephine had to be in the hospital. And he was there when she came home and slept all

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day after taking her medicine. Marvin and I didn't need to speak, just stayed out of each other's way.

This time was supposed to be different, according to Ms. Emily. The medicine would be different, and Josephine was supposed *take responsibility*. That all sounded good, but just like I knew Marvin would come back, I knew Josephine would always be a caterpillar and never a butterfly. The only thing a butterfly would be able to do would be migrate and leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

APPROACHING THE DRIVEWAY to the Dunn place, I caught glimpses of color, plantings, shrubbery, plots of tilled soil, paths of gravel, clean and edged with groupings of vibrant vegetation: green, gold, yellow, pink, red. A proper garden had sprung in raised beds. To me, it was a version of grounds I'd seen in books. Each raised bed, created a patchwork of hues across the space where trash and weeds had been.

Ms. Emily put her hand on my shoulder as we continued to walk toward the new landscaping. "Sorry you missed the fresh spinach, Sabine. I know you were looking forward to it. You can sow more in the fall.

"These are nice fertile beds. Billy has tilled in compost. He borrowed a motorized tiller and really worked the soil over." Ms. Emily stood between the beds on a gravel path with her hands on her hips. "This dirt is probably the healthiest dirt in the county now it's met Billy." She could have been a game show hostess, introducing the next prize. "Just look at how happy

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those flowers are.” She spread her arms wide as my gaze followed the garden to the cistern.

Flowerbeds bordered the house and porches along the back also. I recognized some of the same plants from Ms. Emily’s yard. Everything that could bloom in July, was blooming, full and healthy, not mature, but vigorous.

“Isn’t it lovely?” Ms. Emily said. “The first few days the transplants drooped and moaned about being moved, but within the week, after a few showers, they were standing straight, putting on new growth and singing in the sun.” She giggled. “Billy tended the saplings and sprouts like he was caring for a bottle-fed calf.”

Ms. Emily talked about the flowers as if they were children being fostered. The foliage and color on either side of the steps to the back porch transformed the back entry. The exterior bore no resemblance to the place I’d left. All the rusted implements, tires and discarded batteries were gone, so were the beer and liquor bottles and broken glass. Weeds nor cigarette butts littered the dirt; everything was clean and perfect.

A fresh fire pit outlined by old fire bricks, that had been stacked behind the tool shed, was circled by refurbished Adirondack chairs. The trees had been given a trim, with the lower limbs cut back to expose more space under the canopies and a better view of the pasture and woods.

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“Look here, Sabine.” Emily called my attention to small trees planted at each corner of the garden plots. “These are the grafts from my lemon trees.” She turned toward the shed and pointed. “We planted those mountain laurel saplings you and I rooted. They’re positioned at the corner of the shed, where the southeast breezes will carry the grape scent right to this porch in the spring.”

I stared at the baby lemon trees with glossy green leaves. “You’ll have to show me how to make that lemon pie I like so much Ms. Emily,” I said, in awe of all they’d accomplished in the month I’d been gone. “It doesn’t even look like the same place.”

“We just planted, Sabine. We’ve had a few good soaking rains, and a month is a long time for something to grow in nature. You’ve had a good growth spurt, too, young lady. You’ll need all new clothes by the time you have to go back to school.”

I turned in a circle, trying to fit myself into the transformed yard. In my head, I fit best in the weeds and trash. “Must have been a big job.” I recalled looking at the yard and thinking it would be an impossible effort for me or Josephine. Any inkling that she might try to tackle a clean-up was squashed when one of her friends would discard another old battery or beer bottle.

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The mention of needing new clothes gave me shivers. I didn't want to go to middle school in charity shop clothing, but that's all I'd ever known.

I cringed to admit to myself that I missed the camouflage of the cluttered yard. I could see into the vine-covered shelter under the cistern. Would I even need the hiding place? Hopefully, I wouldn't have to use any of the little refuges again. However, knowing they were there had given me comfort. Maybe the clutter had given Josephine the same disguise.

I pointed to the Adirondack chairs, trying to recognize something of the old place. "The fire ring looks nice there, and we'll use that. I can't imagine how you got all the rubbish removed."

"Billy found someone with a truck. They picked it all up and hauled it away," Ms. Emily said. "Billy said you just have to know who to network with." Ms. Emily opened the back screen door and held it for me to enter.

The back hall was also transformed. One of Grandma Nadine's vases from the bookcase in the front room, sat on the chest against the wall. The wide mouth allowed roses, rosemary, and zinnias to bend over the sides. Ms. Emily entered the kitchen and emptied the bag of apples into a bowl on the table. She stepped to the bottom of the back stairs, where the door

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stood open, and called up the stairwell, “Guess who’s here to see you two?”

Billy yelled back, his voice carrying across the upstairs foyer and down the narrow shaft to the kitchen. “Is it Mrs. Lawson, my favorite person?” Emily shook her head, pursing her lips. She winked at me, muttering that Margaret Lawson had visited while I was gone, and Billy wasn’t a fan. She motioned for me to follow her upstairs. Billy liked everyone, so Mrs. Lawson must have been rude. Or, maybe he remembered the story I’d told him about our terrible lunch experience after church.

I left the gift bag with the clay project on the kitchen table next to the wooden bowl of apples and followed Ms. Emily. As we climbed the stairs, music played and Billy instructed Jared to move something to the right. When Billy saw me he broke into a wide grin. His face was tanned and his dark auburn hair had reddish streaks from the sun. His muscles rippled as he walked toward me, picked me up, and hugged me. He swung me around, my legs dangling at his ankles, “Sabine! I am so glad to see you. Look how tall you are and golden brown.” He put me down and stood back. “You’ve really grown this past month. Look at her Jared. She’s been drinking fertilizer.”

My grin was uncontrollable. The genuineness of my reaction made me quiver with the thrill of seeing Billy and Jared

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again. The warmth of a blush traveled up my neck and across my face.

“You sure enough are a lot taller, Sabine,” Jared said, smiling. He appeared more slender than the last time I’d seen him. Still a giant of a teenager, His cheeks weren’t as round and his T-shirt didn’t cling to him. “Glad to have you back. Come give me a hug. I have my finger where the nail goes for this hat rack.” I hugged Jared as he marked the spot for the antique bentwood shelf with hooks.

Billy’s room was *him*, wood and leather with driftwood, deer horns, and brass accents. Long paisley draperies in muted cranberry and mustard colors, with wood shades underneath, hung on the bay windows facing the balcony. The wood floors gleamed and the wainscoting had been rubbed with oil soap. The room smelled of bee’s wax and leather. I smiled at the plaid fabrics from the stash in the basket Ms. Emily and I had found. They’d been crafted into soft pillows and tossed at the head of Billy’s bed against a polished brass bedhead.

A massive dresser sat under a huge black and gold-framed mirror on the wall opposite the bed. Little details throughout the room, like the bow and quiver full of arrows, hanging on a hook, told Billy’s story. I was tickled to see a coffee mug from the kitchen with pens and pencils in it on a desk beside the bed.

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“This is beautiful, Billy,” I said, scanning the room. “You and Jared did a great job. Your personality is in here.”

Jared said, “I wish I could take credit, but I just listen to Billy’s ideas and help him with the leg work.”

“Well, your legs have done a lot of work,” I said. Jared and Billy gave each other high-fives.

“This is the final touch, this hat rack, and then we’re going to move all my stuff up,” Billy said. “You wouldn’t believe all the treasures in the attic, Sabine. There’s enough furniture up there to do the rooms downstairs too.”

“I’ll have to go up there sometime.” I saw myself on the third floor, not really an attic. There was someone else there with me, two women, but not Josephine. One of them was more erratic than Josephine. I had to take a deep breath to pay attention to what Billy was saying. The wraith was causing sparks to flash in front of me, sparks like I was standing in front of someone welding metal. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the movement of Ms. Emily, as she left the room.

“I have this bathroom right here, stocked with my shampoo and shaving stuff, so you can have the one by your room to yourself. Uh, you okay, Sabine?”

“Yeah.” I rolled my head, shaking away the vision. Billy and Jared poking around in the attic had stirred someone and that someone knew I could see them.

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“Your eyes looked a little funny.” Billy bent to get a closer look at my face.

“I slept in Ms. Wilson’s car all the way home. Are they still bleary?”

“Uh huh, and your pupils were bouncing.”

Ms. Emily had wandered into the foyer and missed Billy’s comments. I tried to laugh it off, but Billy noticing the difference in my eyes—well, what could I do, but change the subject?

Jared finished hanging the hat rack and we went downstairs to eat apples.

The house was different. It was becoming me and Billy instead of Josephine and Old Dan, I hoped. I stared out the kitchen window. “Billy, the backyard is beautiful. I can’t believe how different it looks, like pictures in magazines. I wouldn’t have known where to start. All that junk out there seemed impossible to get rid of.” Ms. Emily and Jared sat across from each other at the table and she cut slices of apple with a paring knife and placed them on a plate.

“Well, Jared and I started looking around and noticed stuff people could take to recycle or refurbish. We did some checking and found a guy that came and picked it all up and gave us a little money for some of the stuff, like copper.

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“Mr. Collins had a connection, and when he heard what we were doing, he called me when a friend of his started working on a house to thin out some landscaping. We hit the jackpot, Sabine. There were ferns, shrubs, lilies, ornamental trees, all kinds of stuff. Wait until next spring. I bet we dug up about a hundred lilies, ginger, and other bulbs and rhizomes.” He grinned as his eyes travelled across the garden. “The best part is Jared and I were able to do his parents’ yard also.”

“I want a tour, Billy,” I insisted. “Come show me.” We grabbed apples from the bowl and headed outside.

“Absolutely, and you need to see behind the shed where we set up the targets for archery. There will be tall mountain laurel out there eventually.” We left Ms. Emily and Jared at the kitchen table, chatting.

Excited to see that the targets looked exactly like the ones we had at camp, I couldn’t wait to shoot. Billy showed me where we would stand. He explained there were three because Jared had a bow and arrows. We could shoot together. He mumbled with a mouthful of apple, taking bites and pointing until he swallowed and could continue to talk

“I did happen to win the archery achievement award at camp,” I said. Billy hugged me, telling me he was proud, keeping his large hand gripped around my shoulder as we walked back toward the house. I’d finished my apple long ago,

eating while Billy talked. He and I held apple cores, and Billy led me to the new compost pile, where we tossed them in with other decaying leaves and rubbish.

“Billy, you remember when I told you I could talk to Remy and mentioned that I can see Old Dan and the children from the bus accident?” I cleared my throat, wondering if he would still be as accepting.

He turned from the compost bin, his grin flattened. “You’re going to tell me you saw something in my room?”

“Don’t freak-out. I’m not sure who she is. I think she might be our great grandmother, Elizabeth Dunn. That’s probably why my eyes were looking weird earlier.”

“Are you okay?” The smile had left his eyes also.

“Sure, I’m okay. She’s just jittery. I don’t know how to explain her. It’s her energy, shaky, and flashy and distracting. We’re disturbing stuff in the house that’s been under dust and years of no one bothering or stirring the air. It’s, well, you know, like the compost pile. You have to stir it every once in a while to keep it cooking.”

“Yeah. I get it. That’s a good comparison.” Billy’s face relaxed. “It’s going to be okay though, right?”

I groaned. “It’s the Dunn house. Who knows?” I picked up a couple of old marbles from the ground, exposed in the turned dirt. A vibration traveled across my palm.

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“I’ve been finding those all over the place,” Billy said. “I wash them and put them in an old mason jar in the kitchen.”

I handed the marbles to him, breaking the connection and stopping the throb. “Yeah, those were probably Old Dan’s and Uncle Ethan’s.”

“That’s what I figured. So what do we do about Elizabeth Dunn?”

“Just know she’s here and she won’t be happy. That’s all we can do. She can’t harm us.” I hoped that was true, pretty sure. “We can smudge again. But, Josephine’s coming back and Elizabeth’s been awakened. There are plenty of others here that Josephine won’t even acknowledge. As Jared says, ‘It might get crazy up in here.’”

Billy laughed so hard he bent over with his hands on his knees. “I can do crazy, Sabine. How about you?”

“Been doing crazy.” I shrugged. “Just wanted you to know what’s going on when my pupils are jumping around.”

“You can’t scare me off, Sabine. I’ll still be here.” Billy put his arm over my shoulder, and we headed back to the house.

“Good. Just don’t ever say you haven’t been warned.” I got a chill down my back, a recognition that there was a warning. Nausea briefly fluttered in my stomach and I fought to keep it from traveling. I had no idea if the warning was for me, or Billy. I wanted it to be for me, because I had the feeling whoever had

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to tangle with Elizabeth Dunn would need to be ruthless. Billy could solve problems. He was resourceful and creative. However, Billy was kind and sought to understand. Something told me that whoever stood up to our great grandmother shouldn't even blink.

When we went inside, Ms. Emily and Jared sat giggling at the kitchen table. I suspected Jared had made a joke about something. Ms. Emily laughed with him often.

I gave Billy the gift bag. "I made this for you at camp."

He opened it and said "I know exactly what I'm going to do with this. Thank you, Sabine. This is the perfect coffee cup." He cocked his head and looked at me from the corners of his eyes as my face fell. He laughed and said, "I'm just teasing, I'm going to put the pens and pencils on my desk in this. It's perfect."

I pushed Billy's arm for embarrassing me, and then dug in my pocket and gave everyone notes I'd written in creative writing class. "Don't read them now. I don't want to get all mushy about it."

Jared and Billy stayed at the Dunn place to move his belongings to the new room while Ms. Emily and I returned to her house to set the table for the dinner party of roast beef, roasted vegetables, mashed potatoes, gravy and homemade dinner rolls. When I opened the refrigerator, a lemon meringue

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pie dominated the top shelf and my favorite pear salad was covered in plastic.

After dinner, Jared told us a story about an acquaintance we all knew. “You know Mary Nell Lewis, has those three little girls, then had those twin baby boys, drives that pretty white suburban. Well, she came in and bought a bunch of groceries and had those two babies with her, pulling one cart with those boys laying up in those carrier deals and pushing all the groceries in front of her.” Jared chuckled and shook his head. He reared back and put his hands in the pockets of his hoodie.

“Honestly, if I was her, I’d hire a sitter before going shopping, or maybe wait for the hubby to get home, but there she was, struggling with the groceries. One of the babies started crying. She managed to check out and I bagged the groceries and followed her out to the parking lot.” He stopped again to chortle. “She starts looking for the car and it’s gone.” His thick black brows shot up to the top of his forehead.

Billy said, “Bro, someone stole her car in broad daylight?”

“That’s kinda what we were thinking. She decides maybe she parked somewhere else. We walked up and down the rows in the parking lot and her car just wasn’t there. Heck, I could see over the tops of the cars. You know the lot’s not that big.” He rolled his eyes.

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“She heads over to a vehicle that looked like hers, but it wasn’t parked where she thought she’d left it. She’s mumbling the whole time, saying maybe she forgot to put the gear in Park and the car rolled. She looked in the windows of the other SUV and there were no car seats.”

Jared raised his palms up in front of him. “About the time she was fixin’ to break down in tears, here comes her car driving into the entrance of the lot.” He pursed his lips, suppressing a smile. “Milo Murphy drives up in *Mrs. Mary Nell Lewis’s* car. Now listen to this. He’d gotten home, and when he gets out to unload the groceries, he notices all the car seats in the back.” Jared breaks down in a hearty laugh, shaking his head.

“What in the world,” Ms. Emily said. “How did he start Mary Nell’s car?”

“Well, that’s the deal,” Jared said, his eyes wide. “Milo’s key opened the door and cranked the car. Can you believe that? He’d already been home and unloaded *his* groceries. He parked and helped us load her groceries and kids in Mary Nell’s car. Before she left, she tried her key in Milo’s car and it wouldn’t work. They bought the cars from that same dealer over there on the interstate. Milo was going to check with the fella about how such a thing could happen.”

Jared had a way of talking that made a regular story sound hysterical. He rolled his eyes and mimicked facial expressions.

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He was a real comedian. I could picture Jared following Mrs. Lewis and the crying babies around the parking lot as he pushed her bagged groceries.

At the end of dinner Jared made a toast with his tea. "I toast you, Sabine Nadine Cole, my soul sister, who I am very happy to have back for the rest of the summer. I read your note and I treasure it." He gave me the universal sign language sign for *I love you* and winked. We lifted glasses and clinked. After we finished the lemon pie and cleaned the kitchen, Jared left. I stood in the middle of the room, amazed at the feeling of having a family gathered over a meal, telling stories.

Ms. Emily and Billy asked me to sit at the cleared table with them. They told me they'd received word that Josephine would be coming home in the next couple weeks. They'd been given a discharge date.

"Ms. Emily found someone to pick her up and transport her, Sabine," Billy said. "We thought we could have a homecoming dinner the day she comes back."

"This is good news, Sabine," Ms. Emily said. "Her counselor said this is earlier than they anticipated, so she's made progress."

Progress, or they're kicking her out because they can't do anything else with her, and she's taking up space. I have to try

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to think positive or I'll have this sinking bad feeling all the time with Josephine home.

Ms. Emily forced a smile and said, "I talked with Josephine on the phone yesterday, and she sounded energetic. I told her about all the work we've been doing, and she's excited to see it. I asked her if she might want us to open her room up, air it out, and get it cleaned. She said that would be fine. She only had one request. There's a trunk in the room at the foot of her bed and it's locked. Josephine doesn't want us to bother with it."

"I can help," I said. "I would like for Josephine to be able to come home to a clean room. It feels good to me." I had doubts about Josephine, but I didn't mention them. She couldn't keep a decent kitchen or bedroom for ten minutes. I had never heard the words excited and Josephine in the same sentence before. I needed to witness the new Josephine for myself.

"And, what about the shotgun, Ms. Emily?" I said.

Ms. Emily's head jerked up. She'd been folding and refolding a dish towel on the table in front of her. "The shotgun?"

"Yes. Josephine is going to notice the shotgun is gone." I glanced at Billy. They knew exactly where it had been, and I noticed it had been moved. It was one of the first things I'd looked for when I'd gone in the house earlier.

Billy cleared his throat. "Sabine, it's not safe to have a loaded gun in the house."

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“I know what you’re saying, but I’ve never touched that gun and as far as I know, Josephine hasn’t either. It’s not that we ever plan to use it, but we know it’s there.” I don’t know why, but my lip quivered and a cold shiver edged down my back. I didn’t insist on anything, but I wanted them to know, the absence of the gun was noticed. If I’d noticed, Josephine would also.

I could accept my camouflaged places being exposed. I could move upstairs and close a door between me and whatever. I could pick flowers and put them in a vase on the table in my private room. However, I couldn’t stand eye to eye with a demon if the stock of that gun was no longer under Josephine’s velvet draperies.

I’d had visions that didn’t match Ms. Emily’s description of Josephine’s return, not only the housekeeping, but the Pigpen swirl of chaos Josephine carried with her like the Peanuts character. Having Billy in the house might help, but there would be storms. Josephine didn’t tolerate storms. Lightning and thunder agitated her into a—well, her own demons would visit her then, and there wasn’t a thing anyone could do about that.

I wouldn’t mention the premonitions. There was no point in getting everyone anxious about what was going to happen. Ms. Emily and Billy had every right to plan for the best, and I would hope for it.

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The trunk had always been in Josephine's room, but I'd never known what was inside. Josephine's insistence that we not bother it, made me curious. However, the visions I'd had let me know I'd unlock it one day, and the contents would be like peering into Josephine's messy mind. One of these days I would know my mother, but the knowledge would probably come too late. I would be able to speak my mind, but I'm not sure Josephine would ever understand hers.

Billy didn't leave until after 10 p.m. We talked about archery and I showed him my award. He was eager to challenge me. When he left, I was ready for sleep. However, Ms. Emily wanted to talk about the gun.

She opened the door to my room and I sat up in the bed. "Sabine, what has Josephine told you about that gun?"

"She told me not to touch it. But, she said if she ever told me to go get it, I should ask no questions and take it to her. She's never asked me to get it."

"You were almost in tears earlier, talking about the gun. Why?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I don't care about guns, Ms. Emily. I've never liked them. It's just that it sits there, like a warning, used to be taller than me, stronger than us, and louder than us, even when it has nothing to do. It's like the crucifix over Josephine's bedroom door, just there."

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Ms. Emily closed her eyes, but she couldn't talk. She eased the door closed.

I dreamt that Josephine came home in a long white gown. She floated above the ground and looked at Billy and me with big, blank eyes. She rode a white horse through the yard, but she didn't know how to put a saddle on the animal, feed it, or put it back in the stalls.

I followed her, trying to help her take care of the horse, but my mother refused to listen. Josephine drifted, her hands moving in the air, touching things and humming. I worried her inattention would cause the horses to suffer. She drifted through the barn and then up the steps and into the house.

Zombie-like people sat on the back porch staring and moaning. They had stepped all over the flower beds and pounded on the doors and windows trying to get inside. Billy told them to go away, but they didn't listen. They looked past me and Billy with round, blank, bloodshot eyes. Their arms flailed in the air, hands grasping at nothing.

Josephine waved to the zombies in slow motion and gestured for them to come inside. Her eyes shone like huge green marbles in taxidermy as she stared at the ghouls. She drifted to the back door, her feet floating above the clean oak floor. When she touched the door knob, her body turned into

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hundreds of jigsaw puzzle pieces, breaking apart, and falling to the floor in a jagged pile.

My eyes flew open, and I was drenched with sweat, furious with Josephine. I didn't need to record the dream. I knew exactly what it meant. Remembering such a nightmare wasn't necessary. I hoped it was a fear and not a prediction, but I couldn't always tell the difference.

Josephine has the ability, her mother, Nadine's, abilities and mine. She doesn't know it because she has no self-awareness, and she attracts the dead and the afflicted living. Josephine created poltergeists. A state hospital in Texas would never be able to fix her. I hoped this dream wasn't a premonition. I suspected the nightmare was another warning.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I SLEPT LATE the next morning after my return from camp. I could barely remember dreaming or even turning over under the covers. There was a note from Ms. Emily on the kitchen table:

Good morning, Sunshine.
Help yourself to some breakfast
then come to the house.

I put on a pair of cut-offs Ms. Emily had made from thrift store jeans and a second-hand, baggy tie-dyed T-shirt, knotted at the bottom. Amelia had taught me the trick about the T-shirt at camp. I pulled my hair into a high ponytail because we'd be working in the heat.

Cooked sausages and left-over dinner rolls sat on a plate next to a folded napkin and clean glass. A small jar of peach preserves with a frilly label sat on top of the note.

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I slathered the split rolls with preserves and placed a sausage in the center and then gobbled them down. The sweet preserves and spicy sausage were my favorite combination of flavors. After tidying my spot at the table and washing my dishes, I grabbed a peach from the fruit bowl and headed across the county road.

Ms. Emily had a friend who brought her peaches from Stonewall every summer. While I was at camp, Ms. Emily had made peach preserves and canned peaches. A few, not ripe enough for canning, had been left in a bowl. The aroma of the one I selected was perfect. The slightly darkened fruit was the sweetness I'd anticipated, and the juice dribbled down my chin as I walked down the dirt road. After the last bite, I threw the pit in the ditch planning to watch the spot for a volunteer tree.

A show of red velvet draperies, whipping in the wind, hung over the clothesline behind the Dunn house. Ms. Emily or Billy had secured them over two lines, elevating the wide, weighted hems off the ground.

Sun rays bathed the crimson tents. Dust motes, shaken loose while the cloth ballooned up in the breeze, were released into the air. I could see them rising like tiny, squirming creatures, creating a fusty fog. Did my eyes actually see these things? New doubts bubbled, and my vision blurred. I questioned what I'd thought was real.

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A strange truck was parked next to Ms. Emily's car in the driveway. It wasn't Jared's. As I got closer, a contractor's logo was readable. Billy's car was pulled up to the shed. I still had a physical reaction each time I saw a strange vehicle in our driveway, the hairs on my neck prickling.

The old washing machine was gone from the porch. My heart quickened at the thought of the feral cats no longer having the tub as a refuge in cold weather. I was confident they could find a place in the woods, but I'd miss them being cozy on the porch.

The deck had been swept. All cobwebs and hornets nests had been knocked from the corners of the ceiling. The exterior had been spray-washed. I had missed the details of this cleansing the previous day, too captivated with the landscaping and often second-guessing what I'd seen.

Maybe, yeah, maybe this doubt and questioning was what the school nurse mentioned, *an emotional shift*. Mrs. Charles had called me into her office, during the last week of school, because I would miss the fifth grade film and discussion about menstruation, what a word. Of course, I had to look it up and was horrified it was a real thing with a definition.

Due to skipping fifth grade, I was singled out to have this defining moment one-on-one with Mrs. Charles. When I told my cabin mates at summer camp about this private talk, they'd

thrown themselves around on the bunks, holding their heads and squealing.

“Holy shit, Sabine. Why didn’t you call in sick that day?”

“I didn’t know what was going on. I just went to the nurse’s office when they called my name over the loudspeaker.”

“Sheesh. Did you wear sunglasses? You should have worn a hoodie and pulled it up over your head,” Amelia said. “I mean, how could you look her in the eye?”

“She mostly just gave me a bunch of stuff to read, put on a film, and told me to come back with any questions. She did tell me some interesting stuff about puberty.”

Amelia shook her head. “Man, that’s the worst story I’ve ever heard. She lied, there’s nothing interesting about puberty. I mean, learning the truth of the whole bleeding out every month is, like, bad enough,” Amelia insisted. “But doing it *mano-y-mano* with the school nurse in her office—.”

“What’s *mano-y-mano*?” I said, worried there would be something else I needed to know.

Amelia shrugged. “I don’t know. My brother always says it. Don’t repeat it. It’s probably dirty.”

None of my cabin mates had any proof to offer, except Cora. She had an older sister who hid boxes in the bathroom and protected her purse. However, other than that, as a group, we had no evidence to confirm the conspiracy.

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The whole point was, I'd read the stuff the nurse had given me. I mean, I'd heard rumors, but I thought people were just making it up, like Mr. Brown, the guy who sells hot dogs out of a cart at the park. Part of his index finger is missing, and he told me he lost it when he was picking his nose. Well, I knew that probably wasn't true, so maybe this regular bleeding thing was made up for whatever reason to keep kids from picking their noses, or masturbating, or another horrific right-of-passage I had yet to learn. Amelia had referred me to Judy Blume.

The gist of my thoughts on any of this was something I'd read in a pamphlet Mrs. Charles had given me. *Emotional changes accompany physical changes*, the brochure said. Apparently, this has something to do with hormones. But, this also matched something in a book I'd found next to Grandma Nadine's Vaseline glass collection in the living room bookcase. It was a book on "understanding your clairvoyance." The onset of puberty, around the age that this reported bleeding would begin, marks the time, especially in girls, when "the knowing," as I call it, flowers and can either be viewed as a gift or a curse. There were references to the *Salem witch trials* and other negative things in history. I imagined Nadine, or some other witchy Dunn woman bought the book trying to figure out their own confusions. I began to envy Billy for being male.

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Needless to say, I didn't mention my "knowing" to my cabin mates at summer camp. So, I just embraced all that mess as awareness. Because, really, I mean, who could I talk to about it? I try not to think about what the bleeding thing will all mean for me. Why would anyone make it up? But the emotional part could be something. This is exactly why I need a little dog to talk to. Remy would've said something funny, or maybe she wouldn't have believed me, or maybe she would have said, *Relax, Sabine. I do it too.*

I stood with my hands in the pockets of my blue jean cutoffs, admiring the back of the house when Ms. Emily walked out with a broom over the top of the dustpan. "Where's the washing machine?" I said, wondering how I would possibly wash blood from all my clothing when the time came, if it ever did. The shotgun is gone and now the washing machine.

"Well, good morning to you too, Sabine," Ms. Emily chirped. "Josephine said to get rid of it. There'll be a new laundry area in the downstairs bathroom." Ms. Emily emptied a dustpan full of dirt off the side of the porch into a large trash bin and turned to go inside.

"Where in the world is Josephine going to get money for all this?" I asked, surprising myself with my accusing tone.

Ms. Emily turned and placed her hand on her hip. "What have you done to your T-shirt?" She didn't stop there, she kept

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right on talking. “Sabine, money talk is not for children. I’ll deal with this. I’m meeting with the contractor now. You have gone too long without air conditioning or a proper laundry room.” Her voice was terse. I wondered about the conversations she must have had with Josephine. My mother could have been drugged to agree to all the changes.

“Are we getting air conditioning too?” That didn’t seem possible.

“Absolutely!” Ms. Emily said. “It doesn’t make sense to live in a grand house like this in South Texas and not have the comfort of air conditioning. Billy and I have talked with Josephine about proceeding. We’re going to get this done.”

“Hmmm, things *are* looking up around here,” I joked. Ms. Emily didn’t smile. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips. She moved with purpose, not her sweet chatty self. I only hoped she knew what she was doing. I ignored the T-shirt question. Amelia had said it was the thing to do and I believed her.

The painted trim on the exterior caught my eye. It was white and fresh, no longer faded wood. Wicker chairs and greenery decorated the porch.

Billy’s tenor voice carried down the back hall as he worked in Josephine’s room moving the furniture away from the walls and cleaning the floor and baseboards. He glanced at me

standing in the doorway and said, “Did they let y’all sleep late at camp every morning?”

“No way. I guess I had to catch up on my rest. I didn’t realize it was so late. What can I do to help?”

Billy didn’t hesitate. “I have most of the furniture off this rug. Let’s roll it up and take it out to the sunroom. Then we can sweep this part of the wood floor and mop with Ms. Emily’s cider vinegar concoction.” Billy stood up straighter and stretched his arms above his head, yawning.

I worried because Ms. Emily was in the most irritable mood I’d ever seen in her. *Is my oversleeping why Ms. Emily was so short with me?* I put all my effort into picking up the end of the rolled rug and finally helped Billy drag the bundle through the door to the hall. We couldn’t use the door meant to enter the sunroom from Josephine’s room, because Billy had blocked it with furniture.

“We can also clean all the windows and mirrors,” he said. “Ms. Emily is taking laundry to her house to wash and dry when the contractor leaves. This room was filthy. I don’t know how Josephine lived in here. You should have seen all the empty liquor bottles.”

“Ms. Emily seems a little irritated,” I whispered. She and the contractor were on the other side of the bathroom door, measuring the space for the laundry closet.

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Billy nodded. “It’s crunch time. There’s lots to do, and, ideally, it will be done before Josephine arrives, so she’s not disrupted by the workmen.” He didn’t seem to be concerned about Ms. Emily’s mood. Had he even noticed?

“Are you kidding? Disruption is her middle name. But, hey, let’s not make Josephine uncomfortable.”

“Now, Sabine, there’s a chance she’s a new woman.” Billy smirked. “I’m gearing up to be understanding and accepting.” He winked and grinned. “What have you done to your T-shirt?”

I jerked my head to the side and huffed, mimicking one of Ameilia’s habits. “It’s the style.” I didn’t think I should have to explain tying a knot in the bottom of an old T-shirt.”

“Hmm. I noticed Jared’s sister does that sometimes. By the way, I found two dead mice behind the bureau. I swept their little carcasses up with piles of fluffy dust, dropped pills, paper wrappers, coins, and folding money too. I picked the currency, out of course, and saved the coins for you.” He winked again. “It was a dustpan of filth in each sweep.” Billy described the debris as we half-carried, half-scooted the rug to the sun porch. I made a note of his comment about Jared’s sister. *The tied T-shirt is a thing.*

“The dust was thick in there.” Billy had opened most of the windows. The room was brighter because the heavy draperies were gone. “It’s a wonder Josephine didn’t get some kind of

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respiratory problem. We threw her bedspread away. Ms. Emily is going to get someone to come in and steam clean the upholstery.” Billy continued to list the accumulation of crapola in Josephine’s room, but I didn’t need to hear the evidence.

Maybe the condition of the room put Ms. Emily in a bad mood. Or, maybe the shotgun still worried her.

“Yeah.” I struggled to talk as I walked backwards with my end of the musty carpet, the dust flying into my nostrils. I sneezed, dropping my end of the rug.

In response to Billy, I said, “The Queen of the Woods was not a housekeeper.”

“Who gave her that title anyway?” Billy said, after we’d unrolled the rug on the porch.

“I did, a long time ago.” Breathless, I coughed and bent at the waist. “She probably doesn’t even know there are woods around here.” *Maybe the discovery of pills reminded Emily of how likely Josephine was to relapse.*

Billy shrugged. “Josephine was never cut out to be a homemaker. She should be the queen with all her ladies in waiting at her beck and call.”

His words reminded me of my dream, Josephine in the white gown with a team of ghouls surrounding her.

“Let’s get to work,” Billy brought us back to the task. He headed to Josephine’s room. “I don’t want to be in here any

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longer than I have to, bad juju. Ms. Emily is going to bring some sage back with her and smudge this room again. Couldn't hurt."

Oh, maybe Old Dan's back, or the woman in the attic has been downstairs? That's what has Ms. Emily out of sorts. Still, I didn't have anything to do with that.

We worked until early afternoon. Ms. Emily went to her house after the meeting with the contractor and came back with chicken salad sandwiches and a basket of clean, folded linens. We ate on the screened porch at the table. A dead plant had been replaced with: fern, airplane plant, and ivy. The wispy foliage trembled under the breeze of a new ceiling fan. I was confident Billy and I could take care of watering and keeping the greenery alive.

The painted floorboards were covered with a clean braided rug Billy had found in the attic. The metal tables and chairs had been painted to match the bead-board ceiling, haint blue, an appropriate color for a haunted house. Sitting on the porch reminded me of the days before Billy arrived and Ms. Emily and I would sit there.

"My meeting with the contractor went well. I'm going to wash all the dirty clothing I picked up in Josephine's room," Ms. Emily said. "I guess you two have plenty to do for the rest of the afternoon." She spoke quickly and matter-of-fact. Her eyes didn't glisten and crinkle as they usually would. The smile was

gone from them. She was still out of sorts. *Maybe the amount of laundry scattered around the room disappointed Ms. Emily?*

After lunch, I cleaned the windows and mirrors in Josephine's bedroom until they were all done. Billy cleaned the floor and baseboards. When our jobs were completed, we went out to the targets and practiced archery. I challenged Billy and beat him with every shot even though I was distracted by Ms. Emily's moodiness.

By late afternoon, Ms. Emily was back. I unloaded a basket of folded laundry from the backseat, where she stood with the vehicle door open, glancing into the car and back to the house, as if she was making sure she had everything.

"The contractor knows exactly how to accomplish getting a laundry closet in Josephine's bathroom. He referred me to an air conditioning contractor. It's set," Emily said.

"Wow. This place will be so different when Josephine gets home," I said, shaking my head. I wondered what else I could say to put Ms. Emily at ease.

She dug in the pocket of her bibbed apron. "Oh, by the way, Billy turned on the faucets upstairs and none of the hot water came on. He checked the upstairs water heater and it's probably been sitting so long it'll need to be replaced." Ms. Emily had one foot inside the car, continuing to hold on to the front door. "I'm having the plumber check it out when he arrives tomorrow

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to start the laundry closet. Billy and I agree the water heater can go in the same utility closet upstairs. That seems to be the only logical place.

“Here are some things we found in that closet when we cleaned it.” She handed me a dog collar with tags engraved with *Ralph* and an empty brown glass bottle. “That bottle looks like an old apothecary bottle, like a druggist might’ve used in the old days,” she said.

I accepted the collar and examined the scuffed tags. I held the bottle up to the light, looking through the amber glass. It appeared to be empty. A glass stopper in the shape of a hat covered the hole in the top. I wondered why those items were in the closet.

The dog collar was for a large dog. I could tell by the width of the leather it was a dog much bigger than Remy. I wrapped my fingers around the worn band. A tingling sensation traveled over my wrist and up my forearm. A vision startled me—a beautiful golden dog, running in the back yard, fetching a stick thrown by a boy in a plaid, flannel shirt. *Where do those pictures come from, the ones in my mind? Why now? The discovery of the collar had stirred the woman in the attic.* Eventually, I’d be able to connect all the dots. I’d been nudged.

When I looked into Ms. Emily’s eyes, I wondered if she could tell I’d had a vision. I would probably have more.

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According to the book I'd scanned, telepathy would increase the older I got. Did she sense a change in me as I did in her? Ms. Emily's eyes were the same, no change. Nadine, the woman in my family I wanted to be most like, probably left the book in the front parlor for me. Maybe she knew Josephine wouldn't clean or tidy anything.

Actually, Nadine had probably left the information for Josephine. However, my mother might have never found the book. Nadine should have put it in the piano bench because Josephine actually opened it. Now, I'm sure it's too late for my mother, but I think it's just in time for me.

After Ms. Emily drove away, I returned to the house. A gust of breeze cooled my damp face. Billy had opened all the downstairs windows and cleaned the sills and casings. Fresh air filled the rooms. The front door stood open, and Billy leaned on one of the massive pilasters on the wide entry porch, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans. He gazed toward the huge oak encircled by an overgrown drive.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm thinking. In the very early days, this used to be a grand entrance, and that oak was the focal point. Wonder what happened to that ginormous limb? See the big circle where something's missing?" He swirled his arm and pointed toward a large oval spot on the tree.

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“Yeah. It could have been a hurricane blew it off.” I focused on the scar from the missing limb, and felt a jolt through my chest and arms.

I watched a man, surrounded by mist, wearing a wide brimmed, straw hat, lean over a huge limb on the ground. He had a long saw and glanced over his shoulder as he trimmed the smaller branches from the larger, fallen limb. Something had happened the day the bough had dropped from the tree, something that had nothing to do with the big oak. The working man would run away a few days after. He’d leave the ranch and flee in fear. In fear of what?

When I looked back to Billy, he said, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking about the tree. I wonder how old it is.”

“We could count the growth rings,” he said. “But, I think we’d have to cut it down. You would have to hold that big trunk while I saw.”

I shrugged. Today, Billy’s sometimes silly comments irritated me. He teased me like I was a child. I was growing used to him. I wasn’t in the mood for teasing.

Josephine was coming home. I was going through something only Grandma Nadine understood. Ms. Emily was going through something too. There were too many changes. I felt prickled. That’s the only way I could describe it. The

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prickling was weird because I should be happy, joyous with all the changes. But I wasn't.

I headed inside through the front entry and into the living room where the piano sat. I pulled the book on clairvoyance from the shelf above Nadine's glass collection. I don't know why, but I flipped to the last few blank pages. Nadine *had* left a note, written on the back inside cover:

January, 1965

My dearest, Josephine,
This book has helped me and I'm sure you will need it also. If you have a daughter, she will need it too. The Dunn men never planned on marrying into gifted women, but we are, and your grandmother, Elizabeth Dunn, was not. She was evil, and you will need to understand your gifts to deal with her spirit. I hope you find this note and if you don't, I hope someone will. I've always loved you and I'm sorry my illness separated us.
Your Mother, Nadine Dunn,

I tucked the book under my arm and headed up the stairs to my room. My grandmother, Nadine, knew I would need this. She'd hoped Josephine could use it, but something had happened to distract Josephine, something vile. Elizabeth, my great grandmother, had been long dead before Josephine was

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born. What could Elizabeth have possibly done to effect my mother, her granddaughter?

I put the book between the bookends on the chest next to my bed. A vehicle pulled into the back drive, and I approached the windows to look down. Jared's truck was pulled in next to the shed. Billy walked toward Jared, his hand extended, both of them wearing wide smiles. But, there was another scene playing out in the yard—the old yard from the early days, where a boy in a flannel shirt threw a stick for a golden dog, Ralph.

Ah, Nadine wasn't the only one my great grandmother, Elizabeth, had threatened. She had her sights on her own son, Nadine's future husband, Daniel,—my grandfather, Old Dan. He appeared so innocent playing with Ralph. What had happened?

There was something calming about knowing Nadine had left the note. She was helping me, letting me know she knew what Josephine and I would be dealing with. Even if she wasn't present, and I had never known her, she'd come to me at exactly the right time with exactly the right message. I believed this to my very core. I also believed that Josephine had been inspired to name me after her mother, Sabine Nadine Cole.

I didn't plan to tell anyone else about the book or my increasing visions, not Ms. Emily, not even Billy. Maybe I

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would eventually, but not now. I couldn't risk them taking it from me. They might not understand.

I turned from the window to admire my room. Having air conditioning and a laundry room would be a new experience in the Dunn house. I wondered how Josephine was going to pay for all the changes. We were dirt poor as far as I knew.

Boys in the back of the school bus called me and Josephine *white trash*. The few times I'd accompanied her to the store, the clerks scowled at us. I assumed their facial expressions were hatred for the way we lived, *poorly*. I planned to ask Billy what he thought. He didn't *always* think of me as a child, like Ms. Emily did. *I shouldn't have slept so late. I should have been here earlier to help. Nadine had been Ms. Emily's friend a long time ago. Maybe my grandmother told her friend the family's secrets.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sabine

1999

OF COURSE JUNE couldn't appreciate the impact Billy had had on Sabine's life. She hadn't been there when Josephine was at her worst. June hadn't seen the way Josephine stumbled through the door following an afternoon and evening at Buck's, a trail of various characters, known and unknown, following behind. June hadn't been hollowed out by Josephine's neglect or numbed by hunger. My sister had been long gone before the day of Josephine's final breakdown.

The first thing Billy did when his father, William, died was find out how he could get home. Sabine didn't care what June's definition of home or father was, or what she thought of Billy's attention. He wasn't a lie. He had been there, at the Dunn place, creating a new normal in Josephine's absence. He'd gotten a job and gone to school, doing all the right things to help Ms. Emily

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and Sabine. So what if he was eccentric and seeking something he'd lost as a child, weren't they all?

I'm not oblivious. I know what he did. Maybe he created something from nothing, but that's what he was good at. Sabine sat at the kitchen table at the Dunn house, wearing a robe, her hair damp following a shower. Alone in the house, she'd considered asking June and the kids to spend the night, but Sabine didn't have the energy to listen to June's complaints about Billy. *The truth is, I'm irritated with my sister for not coming as soon as Billy had. But, if she had, the time with him wouldn't have been the same.*

The kids had been cranky at the end of their day at the beach. June complained about no naps and her husband being away at a horse sale. She'd dropped hints about spending the night at the Dunn place, but Sabine couldn't bring herself to issue an invitation. *She was irritated with her sister. I'm not the one who's in denial. She is. I know exactly what Billy's character was. He was my savior.*

Sabine pushed the plate of sandwich crusts away so she could rest her elbows on the table. Smiling, she remembered the day she'd decided not to gobble down the crusts with the rest of the sandwich. As a freshman in high school, she'd set her intention not to be the ravenous girl who never knew when she'd

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eat again. She recalled her childhood as she sipped pinot gris Daisy had left in the refrigerator.

June could be perfectly pleasant in her own home, but there was something about the Dunn place that brought out her claws. *Maybe that's why I should sell. This place is the thorn in our collective sides.*

Sabine

1982

By the second week in August, the air conditioning and upstairs water heater were installed, and the laundry closet was furnished and working. I turned ten. Billy and Jared took me to the beach to crab, swim, and play in the sun. We put out crab cages, near Rollover Pass. We baited the traps with chicken necks and canned dog food. Jared said we had to keep the crabs alive until they were put in boiling water to cook with spices and his special seasonings. We left the full traps sitting in the surf.

I couldn't see another soul on the beach. Billy and Jared threw the football while I swam in the Gulf. We walked south toward Crystal Beach, picking up sea glass, sand dollars and sea beans. Billy rinsed our finds in the surf, and then dropped them in a pocket he'd fashioned in his oversized T-shirt.

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Jared said, “There’s a sand bucket in the back of my truck, Billy. You can put shells in there until we get back to the Dunn place.”

“Don’t intentionally walk into a rip current, Sabine.” Billy pointed to an area that looked different in the surf. “See how there are no waves breaking in that spot.” It was a flat section between the rolling waves with whitecaps. “That’s the rip tide. Float out with it and don’t fight it by trying to swim. You’ll get too tired. When you feel it let you go, swim parallel to the beach until you reach breaking waves. But, Sabine, avoid the flat water unless the Gulf is all flat, and that’ll rarely happen.

After checking the traps again for female crabs and returning a couple to the surf, Billy helped Jared move the full wire cages to the bed of the truck. I followed. “Why did you take the females out of the traps?”

Jared turned to talk over his shoulder. “They had eggs, Sabine. We want them to stay in the Gulf so they can make more crabs. If everyone keeps the mothers, soon there will be no more crabs.”

“How do you know they’re females? They all looked alike to me.”

Jared put a trap on the sand. “Look here. You see the underside of this crab? Right here, on a female, there could be eggs and the shell is different there on a female. Next time we

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crab, I'll show you the females before we put them back in the water. And, they have to be five inches across the carapace." That's from here to here." Jared pointed to the distance on the underside of a crab. I can eyeball them. I have a tape measure in the truck. I'll show you later, most of these are between six to eight inches."

"Wow. How'd you know that?"

"My Pops showed me a long time ago when I first started crabbing with him."

Billy kept walking, taking the full trap he carried to the back of the truck. He took off his T-shirt, wadding the part he'd tied the treasure in and handed it to me so I could put my treasures in the sand bucket. His muscles rippled under his tanned, perfect skin as I stared at his back. His fluorescent orange swim trunks hung baggy from his narrow hips. Billy jogged toward the water and swam while I sat on a blanket in the shade of Jared's vehicle and transferred my shells and sea glass to the sand bucket Jared handed me.

He worked to prepare the live crabs to be taken home. "I'm glad to have Billy back here," he said as he opened the cages. His slick head was covered with a royal blue bucket hat. He wore a white T-shirt over yellow swim trunks as fluorescent as Billy's. "He was my very best friend when we were coming up, but he's even a better friend now. I think going through hard

times helps people develop character.” He poked a thick finger through the wire of the enclosure. “You behave,” Jared said to a crab.” His voice rumbled in a deep baritone.

I squinted at Jared. “I never knew Billy before he came back. I’m glad he’s here, and Josephine’s allowing him to stay at the Dunn place. I don’t know what I’d have done if he wasn’t going to be there.”

“He went through some stuff with his dad’s illness,” Jared said, glancing up to watch Billy in the surf and then back at the crabs. “I guess overcoming the rough spots is what makes us such wonderful, good-looking people, right Sabine?” Jared grinned.

“Yeah. I always think if I could do something different, I could change what bad things might happen. You know, like sometimes, maybe I cause them? Ms. Emily has been moody, not her normal self.” I sighed. “I’m glad you and Billy invited me to come to the beach.”

Jared rummaged through a tackle box. “It’s your birthday, girl. We’ve been planning this for a while.” He shook his head. “I’m sure Ms. Emily is a little nervous about Josephine’s coming home and your moving. She’s going to miss you. It won’t be the same at her house without your sassy self there. Getting all the work done with such short notice is pressure on her too.” He took tongs from the tackle box and snapped them

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toward me. “No one can control what happens to other people, Sabine, just themselves. You’re a kid. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah, I guess. At least Billy’s still in a good mood.”

“Billy’s *always* in a good mood. You ever seen him in a bad mood?” Jared’s eyes were shaded by his hat and sunglasses, but I figured those eyes were bugging at me.

I shook my head. “Nope. I haven’t. Sometimes that’s irritating.”

Jared chuckled. “Yeah, maybe. He’s a good guy and a good friend. My parents think the world of him.” Jared opened the large cooler in the bed of the truck.

I stared across the beach to the water, running my tongue over a loose molar. “Yeah, I think the world of him too. You and Billy are the only guys I’ve ever known who’ve been kind. Josephine’s never hung out with nice men that I know of. They were all drunks, obnoxious and loud or sneaky. The boys who sit behind me on the bus are mean too.”

I picked up a plastic fork and drew in the sand next to the blanket, writing my name in crunchy letters and then smoothing them away. Sometimes I hoped I wasn’t like Josephine, but what about my father? Was I like him?

I didn’t want to look at the crabs. They were kind of cute and thinking about boiling them alive made me a little sad.

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“Don’t sit near the back of the bus, Sabine. Nothing good ever happens back there.” Jared walked to the front of the truck and opened the door.

I raised my voice so he could hear me over the surf. “I imagine moving in with his father helped Billy. The man who Josephine always told me was my father, Marvin, he just strutted around, never smiling or being positive about anything.” I watched Jared set the crabs carefully in the large cooler with ice in the bottom. He treated the chore gently and seemed to be respectful of the crabs, even preparing damp newspapers under plastic to put on top of them for the thirty-minute drive back to the Dunn house.

“I really thought men must all be jerks. I watched you two for a while before I believed you and Billy were going to be okay. He’s changed the house, but he’s also changed how I think about things. You’ve both changed my mind and my attitude.”

Jared laughed. “I don’t have that power. It’s all you. You need to meet my dad, Sabine. He’s one of the nicest people you’ll ever know. Maybe we’ll have a back-to-school party, shrimp boil or something. He’s always looking for a reason to cook for everyone. Pops is going to like you. You’d probably get along with my sisters, especially the oldest.”

I shook out the big T-shirt and pulled it on to cover my dried purple tank suit and then plopped my straw hat over my damp,

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stringy hair. “Must be cool to know your dad and think he’s the nicest man you’ve ever known.” I stared at the glistening water again. Billy had talked about his father, William, but he’d never said he was the nicest or best or anything like that. I wondered what *my real* dad was like.

“You know, Sabine, sometimes adults do stupid things to try to protect kids. They make mistakes. They want their children to think they’re strong and capable, but adults aren’t perfect.” He closed the lid to the cooler, pushed it farther into the bed of the truck, and latched the tailgate. “The thing I most respect about Pops is that he admits when he’s makes a mistake. I suppose that’s what forgiveness is, not just for our enemies, but for our family and friends.” Jared picked up a towel and wiped his hands after rubbing ice between his palms. “Maybe you haven’t lived long enough to have to forgive. It’ll happen, just remember it’s not for them, but for you.”

“Huh, I guess. I’ve never thought about it that way. I worry about what Josephine will be like when she gets home. I hope she doesn’t run Billy off. He could be good for her, good for us.”

“You’re an old soul, Sabine. I knew that when I first met you. Stay true to yourself and you’ll be fine. Ha, you’ll probably be the President one of these days,” Jared joked.

I peered at him, tilting my head to see under the brim of the hat. I never doubted I could be the President. “Huh, can you be

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president if you say the F-word?” My Josephine vocabulary was the only thing I could think of to hold me back.

Jared laughed out loud and dropped on the blanket, leaning on one elbow, and taking his sunglasses off. “Where do you come up with this stuff? Sure, Lyndon Johnson said it. I’m sure they all said it. I can’t condone you cursing, Sabine.” He wagged his finger at me. “I’m going on record to say I don’t approve, but I kinda think it’s hysterical.” He raised his brows and made google eyes.

“I know. That’s what the principal and teachers told me. Not the hysterical part, but they didn’t approve either. It just slips out sometimes. You can be my campaign manager. Our slogan will be ‘No F-ing War’! What do you think about that?”

“Sign me up! I’ll support you,” Jared said.

Billy walked up while we were laughing. “What’s so funny?” he asked, rubbing the top of his head with a towel.

“Sabine’s running for President, and I’m her campaign manager. You’re in charge of making the banners, Bro,” Jared said, holding up his power fist. “Get your dictionary out ’cause there’s gonna be words in the slogan you might have to look up.”

“Well, that figures. Sabine says a lot of things I have to look up.” Billy laughed. “What are they?”

“Can’t tell you the campaign strategy yet, Bro,” Jared said, sitting up, shaking his head. “We have to have a meetin’, collect

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some money, then we can send out a memo, fill errrbody in.” He put his sunglasses on after cleaning them on the tail of his shirt. “Dan Rather’s going to interview Sabine on television, and I’m gonna stand behind her in a purple suit holding up the peace sign.”

“Y’all figured all this out while I was swimming?”

“Yeah, Bro and we’re gonna put up billboards all over the country. Instead of ‘Uncle Sam Wants You’, they’ll say ‘Aunt Sabine Says Stay Home, No More War, Livin’ in Peace.’” Jared flashed the peace sign with two fingers and shot me a look. “Oh, and I’m going to need an R.V. to drive and deliver the signs, Madame President.”

I threw my arms above my head and made jazz hands. I liked listening to Jared’s speech change when he talked to Billy. He started a swaggered slang that Billy fell into. I giggled, watching them banter. Having a private joke with Jared made me smile.

Billy dried his legs with the towel, playing along with our jokes. “This campaign is going to be fun,” I said. “I say we use Nate’s as our headquarters.”

Billy shook his head. “I think the sun’s gotten to both of you.”

We packed and left the beach, planning enough time to boil the crabs for my birthday dinner at the Dunn house. The Gulf breeze rushed through the cab of the truck as we headed toward High Island. My head drooped as I tried to fight sleep, sitting

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between Jared, as he drove, and Billy, as he sang along with the radio to Queen, *Another One Bites the Dust*.

I longed for a nap, after a day in the sun. However, I was determined to keep up with my brothers. My eyes closed and my head swayed next to Billy's upper arm, against his white T-shirt. The soft fabric smelled of the salty breeze and Billy. His big hand reached across his chest and held my cheek when my head rolled. I opened my eyes, took my hat off, and then snuggled back into Billy's arm.

At the Dunn house, Jared helped Billy set up the propane boiling pot they'd borrowed from Jared's dad. Billy positioned it in the back yard under the shade of a large oak near the fire pit. Ms. Emily banished me from the house after I'd gone to the bathroom, showered, and changed clothes. She stepped out of the kitchen long enough to pull my hair up into a tight ponytail. Ms. Emily insisted I leave her alone while she prepared side dishes and a surprise dessert. I smuggled an empty Mason jar from under the kitchen sink for my beach treasures.

I stretched out on a quilt in the new hammock Billy had hung in the shade, holding my jar of treasures against my chest. Dozing off and on, I sometimes noticed Billy and Jared's voices in conversation, then slowly fell back into a nap.

A spice-filled mist floated above the boiling pot as Jared boiled the Gulf blue crabs we'd caught. When I woke, Billy

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showed me how to crack and clean the cooled crabs and pick out the delicious, flaky lumps of white meat. He collected the claws, setting them in a separate bowl and placed them on ice in the chest. “When were ready to eat, I’ll pull these out. Ms. Emily is making some dipping sauce for them.”

Ms. Emily had made slaw, corn on the cob, mixed melon salad, and garlic bread. She’d also melted butter and stirred in minced garlic, herbs, and spices for dipping the crab claws. For dessert we had chocolate cake with candles in the white and pink decorations.

Sitting around the wooden picnic table, we ate off paper plates. Ms. Emily planned to make crab salad from the leftover crab meat. Before I blew out the candles on the cake, Jared played *Happy Birthday* on a guitar he’d brought, and they sang to me, his deep voice vibrating as if singing a hymn in church. I stared at their faces in the candlelight. It had been a perfect day.

After we ate cake, Billy disappeared inside the house with the left-overs. Jared put logs on the fire pit and lit the kindling. We gathered in the Adirondack chairs and settled in as the moon appeared above the tree line. Jared plucked the instrumental version of *Endless Love* and hummed while Ms. Emily finally relaxed. She’d been taking photos with one of her garage sale Polaroids.

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A clatter sounded from the house. The back door closed and a jingling carried on the breeze. When I turned to look to the porch light, Billy walked to us with a small dog on a leash.

I gasped. My heart pounded. I held my head in my hand thinking my sunburn made me hallucinate. Willing the sight to be there when I turned again, I peeked over my shoulder. Billy was closer, and the dog trotted toward us, pulling Billy behind.

When I stood, the most adorable, fuzzy mutt, tail wagging, sprinted to me as Billy dropped the leash. When I bent to rub her chin, the dog jumped, paws on my knees, and licked my face. When I said “sit,” she immediately responded and looked to me for the next command, still wagging her tail. Tears rolled down my cheeks, so many, I couldn’t wipe them all away.

Billy said, “Happy Birthday, Sabine. She’s yours. This is an adopted puppy from the Galveston shelter.” He put his arm around me as I sobbed and in a kindhearted voice said, “Aww, Sabine. She couldn’t wait to meet you because she wants to know what her name will be.”

I wiped my cheeks on my sleeve and sniffed, kneeling to hug the dog. I don’t know how, but I’d known she was female. She had big brown eyes and piebald curly white hair with a few large black spots. Her ears flopped over to just beside her eyes. She wore a red collar with a big red bow tied to the tags and wagged her tail so hard it threw her to the side when she walked.

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I was speechless. Such an adorable puppy deserved some consideration before getting a name, but to call her anything but that name didn't seem right either. She explored, sniffing and seeming to smile at each of us.

I managed to say, "Thank you Billy. I love her." I turned to Ms. Emily, who had tears in her eyes and Jared, his face frozen in a smile. "Did y'all know about this? How did you keep her a secret?"

Ms. Emily said, "It was so hard because I was excited for you. This precious pup spent the day with me today while you all were at the beach."

Ms. Emily pointed to her Polaroid camera. "I've already taken some cute pictures. She's a good girl. Billy and I already ran it by Josephine, and she said it was okay." I was sure Josephine had no idea it was my birthday. I couldn't remember her ever paying attention to it.

Jared cleared his throat. "Well, I wanted to get you a horse, Sabine, but Billy wouldn't let me. He even made me take the saddle back." Everyone laughed. Jared knew I'd fallen in love with horses at summer camp.

"She'll stay pretty small," Billy said. "The shelter vet said she'd probably not get over twelve to fifteen pounds. She's a terrier mix with a little schnauzer, part poodle. She's smart. So, what's her name?"

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I couldn't think. I gazed at the pup for a long time. "It's my birthday month. I think we'll call her August, Augie for short."

Everyone clapped and Ms. Emily picked up her Polaroid and took pictures. Augie bolted and ran in circles around the chairs. "I think she likes it here," Billy said.

We watched the fire and admired Augie. She leapt into my lap and nestled her head on the arm of the chair. Her eyes slowly shut, her breathing slowed, and she fell asleep.

"That's just about the cutest thing I've ever seen," Ms. Emily said, snapping another photo. She also took pictures of Jared and Billy. We talked a while longer and watched the fire dwindle to coals.

I put Augie down on the driveway and she ran to the grassy area of the yard, sniffed and did her business. I hugged and kissed the guys and thanked them for the great day. I took Augie under my arm as Ms. Emily stood at my side with a flashlight. She and I made our way across the road. Billy and Jared watched from the driveway.

Ms. Emily had food and water bowls on her kitchen floor for Augie. The puppy sniffed around the kitchen and then followed me to get ready for bed. There was a dog bed on the floor in my room. When I crawled under the crisp, clean sheets, I said, "Good night, Augie."

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My birthday had been wonderful. However, worries crowded my mind. Remy had been my best friend. He had been perfect too, and I'd lost him. That had been the worst feeling I'd ever felt. I watched Augie snuggle into the dog bed. She was precious. I didn't ever want to lose her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I DREAMT ABOUT running on the beach, a dog running beside me. A kite flew above, carried higher and higher by gusts of wind from the Gulf. The string snapped, allowing the kite to float away until it was invisible. When my gaze returned to the sand, the dog was gone.

I ran into the water and swam as a rip current tugged at me, pulling me away from the shore. I struggled, as the tide pulled me out, then stopped. The crests of the waves sparkled in the sun. I swam toward the breaking waves, the sparkle, and let them swoosh me toward the beach.

Augie was there with Billy. He smiled. “Good work. Don’t fight, Sabine, Relax.”

I couldn’t catch my breath, panting, irritated with his calm. My chest heaved. I thought I might pass out. Billy continued to watch me, smiling.

The kite string was unwound, scattered over the beach. I picked it up, winding it back onto a spool. The more I wound, the more string blew into endless piles.

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Shuddering awake, I sought Augie, sound asleep on the dog bed. Her body swelled and relaxed with the even rhythm of her breath. I dreaded the day Josephine would come home. I worried for myself and Billy. Maybe the soul of Remy would continue to be my guide, with his cold nose on the back of my leg.

Josephine had named me for water, the river border between Texas and Louisiana. I'd always been drawn to the magic of water, the creek, the Trinity River, the Gulf, even thunderstorms. Water was powerful, gentle, raging, and calm, capable of killing and soothing, cleansing and mud-making.

My mind raced with a thousand thoughts about Josephine coming home. Leaving my bed, I lay on the floor with Augie and must have drifted off eventually, because when I awoke, Augie was sitting, looking at me. As my eyes opened, she licked my face. "Okay, okay." I giggled into her puppy breath. "I'll take you out to do your business."

Ms. Emily drank her morning coffee at the kitchen table. She peered over her glasses from the newspaper and said, "Well, good morning, Sunshine and Sunshine's little dog. Did you two sleep okay?"

I let Augie out the back door and watched her sniff around the fenced yard, choosing a spot in the far corner, and then she ran back to the porch and put her face against the door.

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“She’s the perfect dog, Ms. Emily. She’s smart. She slept all night without a whine. Come on in, girl. Let’s get you some breakfast.”

Ms. Emily made toast to go with the oatmeal she’d already prepared, and we sat and watched Augie. After she gobbled the package of dog food I put in her bowl, she played with a squeaky toy.

“She’s the cutest thing,” Ms. Emily said. “Your grandmother always had a little dog. She doted on them. Dan preferred outside dogs, those that could ride in the back of his truck. I can still see him headed down the road with a golden dog in the back.”

Ms. Emily pushed the newspaper and half-eaten toast to the side and cleared her throat. “Mail came while you were at the beach yesterday, notice of an orientation at the end of the week for new middle school students.”

I had worried about starting a new school. I tried to convince myself it would be like going to summer camp. Maybe I would meet a friend. Her mention of the notice gave me chills on my arms.

Billy worked that morning, so I would have to wait until the afternoon to talk with him. He would only be home for a few hours, leaving again to go to football practice. Ms. Emily said

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we could take Billy lunch and check the details in Josephine's room.

"We should be getting a phone call soon to let us know when Josephine will arrive. The driver said he could give me an estimate." Ms. Emily's fingers traveled around the rim of her coffee cup. I continued to stare at Augie, unable to think of anything to say about Josephine's homecoming or the orientation. Ms. Emily didn't push me about either one.

She put together chicken pot pies for lunch while I got dressed for the day. Later, she baked them in her kitchen, covered them with foil, and put them in a big basket covered with a cloth. She packed extra for the freezer at the Dunn house. Augie sat and watched from the doorway, her nose lifted and sniffing the air until we were ready to leave.

When we arrived at the Dunn house, Billy stood in the kitchen, his shirt soaked with sweat as he wiped his face with a paper towel. Augie ran to him, wagging her tail. He crouched to pet her and said "I told you. You really like Sabine, don't you? She's a good mama, and you'll be very happy." He talked puppy talk and sounded ridiculous. Ms. Emily and I rolled eyes at each other.

Billy sniffed the air when Ms. Emily took the cloth off the basket. He whistled and smiled. "These are my favorite. Thanks for making those extras for the freezer. We're set, Sabine."

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I crossed the hall to Josephine's room while Emily put the food out for lunch. Billy followed, and we stood in the doorway. Ms. Emily had hung the scarlet draperies, opened wide. Sunlight, filtered by the leaves of the surrounding oaks, sifted into the room. The air-conditioned air was fresh with lemon oil and lavender.

The suite had been smudged with sage. All the furniture was dust free and the upholstery and rug had been steam cleaned and put back in place. Ms. Emily had taken a crystal vase from the China cabinet in the dining room and placed it on Josephine's bedside table. The sun radiated from the vase, throwing prisms over the clean wood floor. I followed their dance across the wooden planks to the stock of the gun, back in its place. I closed my eyes, not sure if my sigh was relief or acceptance.

We ate in the kitchen, liking the cooled air. The sweltering humidity outside clung to my skin and hair. I couldn't believe we'd ever suffered through South Texas summers in that stuffy house without air conditioning.

It wouldn't be long before the first cool front of the season lowered the temperature, taking some of the moisture from the air, one of the signs of the back-to-school season. I mentioned the middle school orientation.

Billy said, "You need to go, Sabine. It's an opportunity and the best way to get used to a new school." He dug into the

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second pot pie in front of him. “I’ll be going to one at the high school. Don’t forget, new school for me too.”

Ms. Emily had a dentist appointment and was eager to get home and brush her teeth. A problem tooth, I found out, was one of the reasons for Ms. Emily’s moodiness. Billy said Augie and I could stay with him until she returned. His practice time had been changed to 7:00 p.m. when temperatures would be cooler on the football field.

After helping to tidy the kitchen, I ran up the back stairs to check my room. Augie followed close behind. I hadn’t experienced the upstairs with air-conditioning. I loved the way the light filtered through the bamboo shades and gave a gentle shadowing to my room. Billy came in behind me. “Where’s Augie’s bed going to be?”

I pointed to a spot even with my bed but far enough away so I could see her. Augie curled up on the floor, as if she were in the center of the imaginary pillow. “That’s where you’ll sleep Augie. This will be your new home. You and I will have this room all to ourselves.” Augie cocked her head. “Look at her, Billy. She’s so cute.”

I approached the windows, lifted a shade, and stared at the garden. The yard, alive with butterflies, hummingbirds, and dragonflies caused me to smile. There was always motion,

either from the breezes or insects flitting from flower to flower. I can be okay facing west.

“Everything looks so nice now.” I drew in a long breath. “Billy, Ms. Emily won’t answer my questions, but I don’t understand how Josephine can pay for all this fixing up, like the air conditioning, a new water heater, and the remodeling for a laundry room.” I turned from the window to face him. “What will she do for money? I’d never seen or heard of her working.”

I knew I couldn’t ask Ms. Emily again, because she would say it’s not for a kid to worry about.

Billy laughed. “Sabine, Josephine is one of the wealthiest women in this county or maybe even all of Southeast Texas.”

I couldn’t speak. My eyes shot past him and then back to his face. When I could manage to swallow, I whispered, “What?” I almost choked. I thought we were dirt poor, white trash. *How does he know this?* “What are you talking about?” I felt as if he punched me in the stomach with the knuckles I’d admired on his handsome hand.

His smile disappeared. “Look out there in that cotton field, just past the thicket.” He pressed my shoulder to turn me back toward the windows. “You see that pumping jack? That’s producing oil. Josephine has all the mineral rights for the land that the Dunns have ever owned. The Dunn ranch sits on a salt

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dome. She gets a sizable check every month for doing absolutely nothing.”

“Are you sure? Sometimes we didn’t have water or working plumbing. We’re rich? Are you kidding me, Billy?”

“Nope. I’m not kidding. You’re practically the Queen of Sheba. That’s better than queen of the woods.” He attempted a joke, but his eyes flattened when I didn’t laugh.

My ears rang. I couldn’t believe what Billy was saying. I had terrible memories of not having food, water or electricity, a working toilet. My jaw ached from my clenched teeth. Ms. Emily fed me most of the time while Josephine sat in her dirty room drinking. My clothes came from garage sales or charity shops. I never had money for field trips or book fair. The fever of heat on my face caused bits of my hair to cling to my forehead.

Josephine’s being rich didn’t make sense. I had a new reason to resent her. A cold nose touched the back of my leg. I looked down and Augie sat across the room, where her bed would be, staring at me. Knowing Remy was there, caused me to stop and take a deep breath. I closed my eyes and opened them to Billy’s grimace.

He shrugged at my reaction. “I know this doesn’t make sense.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Josephine doesn’t make sense. You know that. Nothing she does makes sense.”

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“I know.” Gloom surrounded me. Josephine was worse off than I’d thought. I had an intuition, but Billy had no idea how haunting it could be. “You’re right. I have to fight with myself not to be mad at Josephine *all* the time. How do you know about her money?” The sinking feeling caused me to question Billy.

“Our dad told me and June. We got benefits from the military, but he also received child support from Josephine. Apparently, that was ordered by the court when he came down here to pick us up when I was six.”

I stared at Billy’s lips while he talked. It made no sense that he and June had to leave Josephine in order for her to provide food and clothing for them. The fury of the storm that swirled inside me hollowed me out with its dense, tight eye gripping control. I could envision the hurricane on the chart clinging to Ms. Emily’s refrigerator. The hollow center, the peaceful core where birds flew in the sunshine, was so compact and unyielding that the chaos dominated.

“I have an idea, Sabine,” Billy said. “We can try to improve communication with Josephine. When she gets back, let’s have a family meeting. Maybe she can set a budget and we can all give input on rules of the house. We’ll practice with each other before she gets here. When we’re frustrated by her, we’ll tell her, and she can do the same. What do you think?”

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I was still watching his lips, but his words meant nothing. Everything I had ever known collapsed into a big lie. I'd made our situation up in my imagination. Josephine never told me we were poor. We created the feeling, together. I was stuck in that past, the lie I was never really told, and Billy was moving into the future.

“Hmm—I was numb but I had to cling to something, something hopeful, or the storm would carry me away. “I like the idea of it, the meeting,” I said. Taking in another deep breath. “I have to make myself communicate because before, I used to leave and avoid Josephine. I lived in the woods and pastures, talking to foxes and birds, trying to find—I don't know, a friend? When I was hungry, I'd walk to Ms. Emily's.”

Maybe, Billy was a genius coming up with this idea. I was willing to try anything because the old way had never worked. I wasn't willing to sneak out of the house and avoid Josephine and her friends. I enjoyed being there with Billy and loved my room and the garden.

I had to do my part, and I supposed I could if Billy was there to help me. If Josephine had money, she could buy new school clothes. I'd have to figure out how to ask her. I felt as if I'd been socked in the gut, slung from the center of the storm into the rage.

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Billy touched my shoulder, a cautious gesture, as if he knew he'd opened a door I'd never known had been closed. He asked if I knew how to play Spades with cards, an obvious attempt to distract me. I didn't. I had played War and Fish at camp and Old Maid with Ms. Emily, but no Spades. He agreed to teach me. He said if I learned Spades, he would teach me Canasta. He must have seen in my face the disappointment and confusion. Coaxing me to play a game, he tried to change my focus. *Wasn't it good news that we wouldn't have to struggle?*

“We’ve been working hard, Sabine. You’re ten, but you’re supposed to be playing most of the time, not working. There’s an old game table with chairs in the attic.” He went to the door and looked into the foyer. I supposed he imagined where the table could be. “It even has an embossed leather inset on top, fancy.” He wiggled his shoulders and grinned. “We should bring it down to the big hall and clean it up to create a recreation space.” He pointed to the center of the large landing. “There’s a bookcase that could hold the board games, and we could have entertainment, right there. For today, we can play at this table by your windows.”

He had plans to continue going in the attic. There was no reason to stop him. What was going to happen, would happen even if Billy weren't here. The woman, probably Elizabeth,

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wanted to deal with me, not him. She'd been careful to let me know she had no business with Billy.

While we played cards, Billy said, "Don't tell Ms. Emily I talked about Josephine's finances. Most adults think that's not a kid's business. You're smart and more responsible than most kids your age. I just didn't want you worrying about money."

He continued to try to explain what he'd just told me, but I was distracted, running the past over and over in my head, the days with no coat or comfortable shoes, the days I sat in the library while others left on a field trip, the days I'd failed to bring a gift for the child I'd drawn for the Christmas exchange—too many days.

"This is just between you and me. Josephine has an attorney, according to Ms. Emily. That attorney looks out for Josephine's wealth." Billy shuffled the cards and glanced out the window to the tops of the trees. "When Ms. Emily tells you that money talk is not for kids, she's telling the truth. In Josephine's case it's extremely complicated. And, apparently, Josephine knows her weaknesses make her vulnerable to people who might take advantage. She and her attorney have worked this out."

Yeah, well I don't give a crummy crap what they worked out. Did they consider she had kids to take care of? I wanted to cry, scream.

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Billy said, “Neither you, nor I are involved. However, we can make our case to Josephine when we need to.” He dealt the cards and put the rest in a stack in the center of the table. “Getting crosswise with her can make her shut down. I’ve experienced that from the few phone conversations I’ve had with her. She might be fragile, Sabine, but Josephine is stubborn. She’s not going to let anyone take advantage of her.”

Well, bless her flipping heart. He didn’t have to convince me of the stubborn part. We played Spades until Ms. Emily came back from the dentist. She brought burgers from Nates and we ate in the kitchen. Billy left for football practice, winking at me as he opened the screen door and then jogged down the back steps.

The truth is, I had learned a lot from Ms. Emily decorating my room with garage sale finds and so little money. I was prouder knowing we did it using and reusing what was already there.

There was no telling the things I didn’t know about Josephine. Billy was a little kid when he left her. Had Ms. Emily filled him in? Did his father know how much money Josephine has?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SABINE

1999

CRICKETS CHIRPED AND coyotes howled in the distance, as Sabine sat on the porch swing with a glass of wine. *I love this place. This is my favorite time of day.* In the old days she would have run her hands through a dog's coat and eventually put her head down beside him and fallen asleep. *I never needed anyone, not a person anyway. I could do that again, maybe.*

She could have curled up with a little dog and been happy with an isolated life at the Dunn place. But she'd have been considered a hermit. Would she carve out a place to read under the shade of the ivy-covered cistern? Would she go that far?

I'll let Dale know tomorrow. I'm selling. There are too many memories here to decipher and come up with happily-ever-after. I'll never give up my adoration of Billy. He might have left me

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here, but he didn't do it on purpose. He'd always wanted to live where I live now.

That was the part that haunted Sabine, the dying, the leaving and not returning. *I'm perfectly happy in New York. June and her family come to visit, and we never say a cross word to each other. Millie comes and we do all the shows and theatre. She hasn't thought twice about leaving Texas. She's happy.*

Millie could be Sabine's voice of reason. The problem was, Millie had as much emotion tied to the Dunn place as Sabine. The days with Billy and Jared there had been magical, even when Josephine had hidden behind her bedroom doors. It was fate that Sabine had been seated next to Millie so many years ago.

Sabine

1982

I reluctantly attended the orientation at Grayson Middle School. I told myself I could sit through anything for a few hours, and I wanted to see where I'd be on the first day of school. After all, I'd spent most of my elementary career sitting in the reception area of the principal's office.

As expected, they called names in alphabetical order to be seated in the auditorium (like there might be any other way to

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do it). Before Sabine Nadine Cole, the principal had called Mildred Annette Collins.

Arriving after me, the most beautiful, golden-brown girl sat next to me. She smelled like expensive soap, the kind that comes in paper printed with flowers, wrapped with ribbon, pressed into place with a wax seal. Her hair was pulled back in a tight puff just at the back of her head. She was stylishly dressed in blue jeans, rhinestones on the pockets, and a red and white striped t-shirt with a logo on the front. Spotless, red tennis shoes, Chuck Taylors, were crossed at her ankles, and her legs seemed to be twice as long as mine. Mildred Collins's fingernails were painted bright red.

I couldn't recall what Randall Eugene Colby wore. He didn't turn to look at me or say hello when I'd plopped next to him. I hadn't bothered to greet him either. He'd frowned at me when I'd taken the seat out of order.

I peeked at the girl. Her complexion was perfect. Thin, silver loop earrings, shiny against her dark skin, hung from her pierced lobes. She turned to me and said, "Hello, my name is Millie. I'll be in sixth grade. What's your name again?"

"Nice to meet you, Millie, my name is Sabine." I half whispered, wishing for more words, but I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Do you have your schedule?" Millie leaned toward me.

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“Yes, yes I do.” I pulled out my schedule, crumpled from being crammed in the pocket of my blue jean shorts. Of course, I wore my flip-flops, against the dress code I’d just learned. Ms. Emily had attempted to dissuade my shoe choice, but I hadn’t taken the time to explain my worn tennis shoes were too small.

Millie reached into the black bag she carried and pulled out folded paper. We compared, pleased to discover we had several classes together. Millie smiled big, revealing sparkling white teeth. We sat huddled, comparing class assignments.

“I’m so glad to meet someone on this campus,” Millie whispered. “I was worried I wouldn’t know a soul. I went to a private school last year. Where do you live, Sabine?”

I decided to start off truthful, now that I knew we’re rich. “I live out FM125 at the Dunn place.”

“Really, my brother, Jared, goes out there to visit his friend Billy,” she said looking at me more closely.

“Are you kidding? You’re Jared’s sister? I love Jared! He and my brother are best friends,” I said too loudly. Mrs. McAfee scowled at us over her half glasses and suggested we visit later. Millie grabbed my hand and squeezed. We sat silent for the rest of the orientation.

When the presentation was over, Millie and I walked out together and wandered down the sixth-grade hall with the rest of the students. After touring classrooms and common areas, we

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waited outside for our rides. Millie took a pair of sunglasses out of her bag and put them on, glancing down the street. My new friend looked like a model. I didn't have to search for words; they came automatically, rushing through my lips. I wanted to get them all out before Millie walked off.

She turned to me, smiling. "You know, when you said your name, I figured you had to be Billy's sister. I had never heard that name before. I like it, unique. I was hoping you would be the one I hear about from Jared and Billy. My family loves Billy."

"You'll have to come over with Jared sometime. Billy and I put up a game table for playing cards and board games."

"I'd love to come. And, you need to visit our house, too. What are you going to wear on the first day of school?" Millie said. Her eyes danced.

"I don't know." I had no idea where to start. Ms. Emily and I would have to figure it out. I doubted Josephine would be interested. New shoes were at the top of my list.

Millie described the outfit she'd already hung in her closet, ready for the first day. She'd even draped the tights she'd wear over the hanger and put the shoes on the floor underneath. I could picture the clothes with no mannequin staged in a closet.

When Billy arrived, Millie had already driven off with her dad. I was excited to tell him I'd made a friend and it was *Jared's sister*.

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“Wow.” Billy said. “I had no idea Millie would be going to the same school as you. She went to private school last year. You’re going to like her. You’ll like her mom and dad too.”

I nodded. “Jared told me about their dad. He said maybe they’d have a party before school starts.”

“You couldn’t have a better friend than Millie, Sabine. I just met her when I came back to town. She wasn’t born when I left. I’m going to tell you something else, but don’t tell Ms. Emily. Mr. Collins is the best cook in the world, and he loves to feed people.”

It was Friday and we looked forward to the weekend. Instead of football practice, Billy had attended a meeting with the other players and coaches. “The head coach is the best, Sabine. He’s setting up a mentoring program. Each upperclassman will choose a freshman to support and help them build team spirit. I picked a guy who lives out near the Dunn place.”

My arms prickled, the hair standing out. “Oh, yeah. Who is it? I probably ride the bus with him.” I held my breath. There were only a few boys who matched the description, and all of them had bullied me and harassed Josephine and Marvin.

“His father is absent, so he’s had some hard times. His name is Dale Dawson. I thought he could come over and I could tutor him and take him out for a burger every few weeks.”

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“My head dropped, and I stared out the open car window, allowing the wind to dry tears before they slid down my cheeks.”

Billy turned down the radio. “Don’t you think the coach’s idea about mentoring is great? I wished I’d had a mentor when I was a freshman.”

I swallowed, envisioning the night I’d hidden in the Dawsons’ yard, listening to Dale and his friends call my name. “Don’t bring him to our house, Billy.”

“Why not? We have plenty of room. He won’t be in anyone’s way.”

“Please don’t bring him to our house. That’s all I’m going to say.” There was no way I could explain what had happened, not to Billy, especially not to Billy. I’d never told anyone. I hadn’t even looked at Dale Dawson since that day. He seemed to be trying to avoid me too, which was just fine.

My skin tingled, and my heart sped. I’d been excited about meeting Millie and looking forward to talking to Ms. Emily about school clothes. The mention of a name from my past caused me to break into a cold sweat. Nadine’s voice spoke to me in the rushing wind. “Like a thorn, festering in the tip of your finger, Dale Dawson will infect you until the wound is opened and flushed.”

Why do bad things resurface each time something good happens?

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“I think you’re being unreasonable, Sabine. Don’t be embarrassed by Josephine. I think she’ll pretty much leave us alone. Don’t you? I wouldn’t try to stop you from inviting Millie over,” Billy said.

“If you care about me at all, Billy. You won’t ask Dale to the Dunn house.” I turned toward him so he could see my tears. “I promise you, I wouldn’t say this if it wasn’t real important to me.”

“Okay, okay. I don’t get it, but maybe I should choose another kid. I’ll do that. I just thought he would be a good match.”

“Thanks.” Billy was probably right. Dale Dawson could benefit from mentoring, especially with Billy. If I could gather the strength to find the words to tell Billy what happened, I could force the thorn from my finger, as my grandmother’s voice said, but I *just couldn’t*.

When we got home, Ms. Emily was at the Dunn house, cutting flowers. I should’ve known that was a signal. Augie was in the yard and came running to greet us with her tail wagging. I was eager to show Ms. Emily my class assignments, tell her about Millie, and talk about school clothes. I still wanted to do those things, but I wasn’t excited. My mood had changed.

We entered the kitchen for lemonade, while Ms. Emily looked at my schedule. I expected her to be more excited about Millie, but Ms. Emily seemed distracted also. She’d received a

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phone call from Josephine, who would be coming home the next day. My mother was expected to arrive about 4:00 P.M.

Ms. Emily had planned a dinner to celebrate the homecoming. I privately wondered why we would be celebrating. I was sure none of us thought this could be the beginning of anything positive.

Augie sat at my feet, my bare toes massaging the top of the pup's head. Sick to my stomach, I was unable to be happy about Josephine's coming home. I hadn't expected her return to make me physically ill. However, I hadn't expected Billy to want to mentor Dale Dawson, either.

Billy said, "This is good news Sabine. We can start practicing the family meetings." I looked at Billy with a smirk.

"I agree with Billy," Ms. Emily said. "This is good timing. It'll give you a chance to establish a routine and get used to living in the same house before school starts."

Josephine's routines weren't healthy. I was doubtful, and my imagination ran wild. Augie looked at me and for the first time told me to get a grip, in our non-verbal animal language, reprimanding me.

Billy would tell me to focus on the positive, try to draw optimism to the surface to attract the constructive. I considered this might be the most difficult thing I'd ever do. *Is it even*

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possible? The names of Josephine and Dale coming up within the same hour, made my stomach drop and drop again.

We spent the rest of the day moving my belongings to the Dunn house. I left enough at Ms. Emily's to spend one more night.

Billy had already told me that the social worker probably didn't want to risk my living there with him alone. He talked about sexual abuse and that even family members could take advantage in that kind of situation. He said to trust my instinct and get away from people who made me uncomfortable. I thought that was great advice. It would have been the perfect time to confess it had already happened; I bristled with anger.

I never thought I could be angry at Billy, but I was angry at everyone. *Where were you when I was four years old? How do you get away from people in your own home? Of all the times to pick to tell me this, why on the same day you told me about mentoring Dale? Why on the day we know Josephine is coming home tomorrow?*

As much as I cared for Billy, I wasn't going to tell him what I'd been through with some of Josephine's friends. I understood everything he'd said and recognized how hard it was for him to do so. I certainly couldn't force myself to bring up the abuse. He would be a good father someday. It made no sense that

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anyone thought I was safer at home with Josephine there. My world was upside down.

Billy challenged Ms. Emily and me to a game of Spades. We ate pizza off paper plates for dinner and played cards until we were tired. We laughed and joked and had a great time. I pushed the negative thoughts away but only for a while.

I sat at the edge of the conversation about dewberries, aware Billy was trying to show me how our lives *could* be. I listened to their chatter and watched them put on happy faces. He didn't have to work on being positive. It was natural.

I wondered how I could erase what I knew. It came bubbling to the surface. At first, it was a glimpse in the back of my mind, a muddy reminder of my days watching Josephine's sluggishness, and then it was a flood of messy thoughts clogging my brain. Why did this have to be a struggle? *Josephine was the sick one, wasn't she?*

Billy's instructions about the rip tide came to me. *Don't struggle, let it happen, relax, wait, and when the opportunity arises, swim to the shore.*

"I bought groceries today and stocked the pantry," Ms. Emily said. "I'll roast a chicken for dinner, and we'll have a special dessert."

All I could do was think about what the kitchen was like when Josephine was there. It was a different place now, full of

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Ms. Emily. But, she wouldn't come to the house when Josephine was there. It would be awkward.

Ms. Emily and I stood to leave, but the mood had changed. My mucky thoughts about Josephine dampened our little party. The homecoming might be more difficult for me than for Josephine.

When I went to bed that night, it felt like my last day of happiness. *Could there be a fresh start?* Augie peeked at me through her curly eyebrows. I told her in our silent language our lives would change the next day. Augie said she knew, and it would be an adventure. She had no plan to be swayed by my moods. The dog was as upbeat as Billy but more arrogant about it.

I dreamt Josephine had arrived on a white horse, like Lady Godiva with no clothes. She waved, but she didn't smile. Josephine rode slowly around the garden paths with her auburn hair falling softly around her bare shoulders and down her back to her waist. She sat, buck naked, her dainty nose in the air, peering down at us, as if we were the naked ones.

Restless in the vision of Josephine's return, I tossed and turned. Waking to dampness on the pillow, I told myself it was only a dream. I thought of all the changes I'd made since Josephine had left, not just the physical changes, but my attitude.

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The visions reminded me I could be helpless, but I wanted to think of myself as mature and capable.

Billy's presence would make all the difference. At least I had hopes, high hopes. Surely, Josephine would be as impressed by his personality and attention as Ms. Emily and I were. How could anyone not love Billy? Josephine was his mother. He was her long-gone son, and any mother would want to claim him. Wouldn't she? He had a way about him, a winning way. Everyone seemed to think so. What would Josephine think?

The atmosphere was thick, like the pressure before a storm. I had no idea what was coming, or even if it would arrive with Josephine. All I knew for sure was that my room faced west, and I didn't want anything to end. But something was about to begin, something that could change all our lives. Something in the attic and at the foot of Josephine's bed could tell me everything I needed to know about her, Billy, me, and the Dunns before us.

Next in the series, *Billy's Story, Book Two of the Sabine Series*. Sabine learns to love the new routine of family with Billy and his best friend, Jared. However, Josephine struggles to adjust to the new family dynamics. Nothing happens as expected, and it's not just Josephine making life difficult. Sabine discovers life's disappointments are not always within anyone's control.

Reviews are gold for indie authors. I appreciate your honest opinion and your time.
Thank you for reading.

Phyllis H. Moore

Other Books by Phyllis H. Moore

Billy's Story, Book Two of the Sabine Series

Josephine's Journals, Book Three of the Sabine Series

Secrets of Dunn House, Book Four of the Sabine Series

Opal's Story

Tangled, a Southern Gothic Yarn

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BILLY'S STORY

CHAPTER ONE

BILLY EVANS WAS home, exactly where he wanted to be. For most of his eighteen years he'd dreamed of a real family with siblings. Was there even such a thing as a normal family? Maybe he could find out what that could be like with Sabine, Ms. Emily, and maybe Josephine. She seemed to be a question mark, even for Sabine and Ms. Emily.

None of them knew what to expect, and all of them, including Ms. Emily, were anxious, because today was the day Josephine would be coming home after nine months in the hospital. Their anxiety wasn't the expectation of anything positive, but similar to following a category five hurricane as it crossed the Gulf of Mexico, on course to slam into shore just a few miles away. Billy wished for a radar screen to follow Josephine's approach to the Dunn house. She was late.

"Maybe there was a car accident, or maybe Josephine decided not to leave the hospital," Sabine had said.

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Billy had shrugged. “Yeah. Or maybe she has moved to California. She could have run into an old friend and dropped by for a visit.”

“That wouldn’t be good, Billy. Her old friends would be at the bar by now.” Sabine had brushed the garden dirt from her hands as she sat on a raised bed pulling weeds to kill time.

Billy shrugged. “Well, maybe she decided to go camping. She met someone at the hospital and they’re on their way to Colorado to climb a mountain.” He leaned on the rake he’d been using to pull leaves off the gravel paths. “Or, maybe she met a movie producer, a guy who wants to film her life story.”

“Oh, Colorado can’t be right.” Sabine had giggled. “Her mountain climbing boots are still in her closet.”

“You’ve already started building a wall around yourself, Sabine,” Billy said, as they waited for Josephine’s arrival. “I can see you doing it, like you’re protecting yourself from what could go wrong.”

“I know I build walls Billy. But I don’t know how to stop. She’s always disappointed me.”

“Hmm. So instead of a wall, make yourself a bubble, something you can see me out of, and I can see you.”

Sabine’s frown morphed into a grin. She shook her head. “You always know the right answer for everything. I do need to be able to see you too, and Ms. Emily. I’ll try. I really will. But

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you know I can see things you can't. It's scary in here sometimes."

Billy laughed. "It must be, Sabine. I can't imagine how you deal with the things you see, but I admire you for it."

Billy, Josephine's only son, had moved hundreds of miles away and into his father's home at the age of six. A Vietnam veteran with several illnesses, William Evans had died, and Billy was now determined to finish high school and reunite with the family his older sister, June, had no desire to reconnect with.

The delays Sabine and Billy had talked about seemed preferable to the one that eventually played out. Josephine was fashionably late, arriving at 4:35 p.m.

A black sedan whipped off the county road and down the drive, throwing sand and gravel in a trail behind. The driver pulled to a stop, as Billy glanced at Sabine, grasping her shoulder. Ms. Emily appeared on the back porch, drying her hands on a dish towel. The driver's door flew open, as if he couldn't wait to exit the car. He walked to the trunk to retrieve one suitcase.

Josephine's slender leg eased out the back door. "Lord, I hope she's wearing clothes," Sabine whispered. She'd told Billy about a dream of Josephine arriving naked on a horse like Lady Godiva. Billy squeezed Sabine's hand, trying to stifle the laugh that made his lips quiver.

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Josephine stepped out of the car like a queen disembarking a carriage. She was dressed, *thank you baby Jesus*, in a dark pink, knit shift that stopped just above the knee. The perfectly-fitted garment was sleeveless. Josephine's arms looked as if she'd been lifting weights. Billy had no idea as to what she'd looked like before she was hospitalized, but Sabine had made it sound like she was a disheveled mess in a soiled night gown, her long hair matted. He paid attention to fashion. In Billy's opinion, Josephine was very well dressed for her return home.

Her auburn hair was styled in a chin length bob and waved in thick, loose curls all over her head, falling in front of part of her face. Aviator sunglasses covered her eyes leaving her pink-painted mouth visible. When she tossed her head, Billy glimpsed large pearl earrings. She wore a black patent leather bag with a shoulder strap tied with a silk scarf and matching pumps. No one would have taken the time to assemble such an outfit unless they intended to make an entrance.

"I've never seen her wear anything like that," Sabine uttered a loud whisper. "Where'd she get those clothes?"

Billy nudged Sabine and whispered, "I didn't know this was a formal party."

Sabine released a giggle, prompting Josephine to lift her head, squinting or scowling. Sabine shrugged.

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Billy approached the car to help with Josephine's bag, and Ms. Emily moved forward to greet the honoree of the homecoming party and lead her inside.

He'd wanted Ms. Emily and Sabine to have a chance to greet Josephine before he reintroduced himself. Augie had followed Billy, sniffing. Billy knelt and rubbed Augie's ears. Somehow the touch of the pup's fur helped steady Billy's pounding heart. He'd had a yearning for Josephine's acceptance, but he told himself he could be okay if she was as cold as he'd remembered.

It had been almost a year since Josephine had been driven off in the back of the county patrol car. Sabine had described the crisis to Billy several times. According to his little sister, she'd watched the scene and then grabbed Ms. Emily's hand to cross the county road and live with their neighbor. Of course, there were legal papers granting Ms. Emily temporary custody allowing Sabine to continue to go to school and giving Ms. Emily the right to consent to medical treatment. Billy was learning things could get complicated when Josephine was around.

According to Ms. Emily, his return to the Dunn Ranch, during his mother's hospitalization, was the answer to Emily's prayers for Sabine. They adored him, and he felt that adoration to his very center. He'd only been at the Dunn house a few

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months, but they embraced him as if they'd longed for his return his whole life.

He'd never expected the two-parent, *normal* family, possibly nonexistent, but he had naturally gravitated to his role as Sabine's big brother. She'd surprised him. He hadn't expected her to win his heart, but she had.

The hope had to be bigger than the fear for both of them. Billy was generally optimistic, but he hadn't lived in the same house with Sabine and had no idea what it would be like with Josephine there. Sabine had said her constant fear was that Josephine would return and insist he leave.

Sabine shuffled from one foot to the other but didn't move toward her mother. Billy could feel Sabine's discomfort as she waved and said, "Welcome home, Josephine." His neck burned with uneasiness for Sabine. She was trying her best. Maybe they should have practiced the arrival scene.

Billy bristled at Josephine's lack of response. She had always been a neglectful mother, but ignoring her child's greeting was rude, even if she'd been a stranger. Of course, Sabine had been used to such reception, but for Billy it was heart-breaking to watch.

Their mother looked Billy over. He held out his arms to hug her, and she grabbed his shoulders, holding him at a distance and said, "I can't believe you're Billy. You're grown and you

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don't look anything like the last time I saw you." She tilted her head and peered at him as if she was examining produce in the grocery store with critical eyes. She could have been squeezing a tomato or thumping a melon. She lowered her sunglasses and looked over them, flashing iridescent green eyes.

"Well," Billy stammered, "I'm about twelve years older than the last time you saw me. I was a little kid then."

Emily added with a nervous laugh, "He's grown into a fine young man, Josephine. He has been a big help around here. You'll be so proud of what he's done."

Sabine remained in her original spot. Josephine glanced at her and then back to Emily. "Sabine doesn't look anything like herself either. I believe you are the only one who looks the same, Emily." Josephine lifted her chin, maybe an attempt to look through the bottom of the lenses of her dark glasses, but she appeared to be looking down her nose.

Emily said, "I do wish that weren't the truth, but here I am old reliable, same hairdo, same glasses, same wrinkles." Billy hated to hear Ms. Emily reduce herself like that. He approached her and put his arm around her shoulder, escorting her to the porch.

Billy whispered in Ms. Emily's ear. "That perfume she wears smells funny."

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Emily shook her head and shrugged. “It’s her signature fragrance, Tabu. One of her boyfriends, Wendell Weems, brings jugs of the stuff from Mexico. Seems she must have smoked in that poor guy’s car all the way from San Antonio.”

Josephine’s heels wobbled in the loose gravel. “Who knew there could be flowers here? I only remember weeds.”

“Wait until you see the inside,” Emily said, stopping and turning back to Josephine. “Both of these young people have worked so hard getting everything ready for you.”

When Josephine was closer to Sabine’s self-appointed spot, Sabine took a few steps forward and offered a sideways hug. Josephine put her arm around Sabine and squeezed her shoulder. Billy glanced toward them at the flimsy gesture.

Josephine looked off in the distance, gazing critically at what used to be old tires, rusted metal and weeds that had strained toward the sunlight. She looked fresh, but there was a heavy odor of cigarette smoke and too much perfume. Her shoes sank down in the gravel path as she continued to struggle to walk. “Why would anyone think sand and gravel would be a surface for walking?” Josephine said.

Sabine stopped and stared at Josephine’s shoes. “Most people around here wear boots or tennis shoes, Josephine.” Sabine glanced down at her own sandals. “Or, flip-flops. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear those kind of high heels before.

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Did y'all wear those shoes at the hospital?" Billy rolled his eyes at Sabine. "Do you need to hold my hand to walk, Josephine?"

"Don't be silly, Sabine. I'm fine."

Sabine shrugged and headed toward Billy and Ms. Emily.

Billy clutched Josephine's bag as he held the back door open for everyone to enter. The humid aroma of baked chicken wafted into the hall, an aroma that let Billy know Ms. Emily's chicken wouldn't be dry. Josephine glanced into the kitchen and said something smelled good then examined the newly decorated back foyer. Her black pumps pranced under her firm calves as she crossed the hall to her bedroom door, as if a homing device were embedded in the heels of her shoes.

A colorful bouquet of zinnias topped the chest in the hall. Emily's attention to details were obvious. Billy walked behind Josephine with her bag swinging at his side. She put her purse down on one of the upholstered chairs in her room, and Billy set the suitcase down on the floor beside her bed. Sabine and Emily eased into the room.

Josephine's head jerked toward Billy. "Put it on the bed. I don't want to have to lift it to unpack."

Billy complied. Josephine took off her sunglasses and scanned the room. The same brilliant, green eyes and perfectly arched eyebrows had hidden behind the dark lenses.

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“Everything looks real nice,” Josephine said, her face never changing expression. There was no betrayal of her feelings. Josephine had made her entrance. So far, she was an emotionless vessel, holding in any gesture or comment that could possibly put them at ease.

“You want to take a tour and go upstairs?” Sabine asked. She’d been gushing about how eager she was to show Josephine her bedroom.

Josephine was arrogant. Billy supposed her attitude was a farce, a rigid attempt to deal with overwhelming emotions that must be bombarding her. He felt the same, a hesitancy to let down his guard and acknowledge the painful reunion of a son and mother so long separated. He was also aware that Ms. Emily watched them. She must surely feel the earthquake of rumbling of emotions just under the surface of their forced interactions.

Sabine, on the other hand, was calling out every comment Josephine made. Billy caught himself tensing when Sabine would begin to talk. She was having a little bit too much fun with Josephine’s discomfort. Billy pictured Sabine sitting inside her bubble, taunting him, “How do you like me now, Billy?”

He suspected Sabine considered herself a super hero, wanting Josephine to cower to her powers, groveling and begging for forgiveness. She surely imagined herself with one of Josephine’s Hermes scarves tied around her neck and flowing

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down her back. Sabine could take one leap and fly around the room, landing in front of Josephine with her hands on her hips to demand she go by the rules.

Sabine had cackled when she'd fantasized this scenario aloud to Billy. He'd known it had been her way of dealing with the situation in her imagination. However, now, in the thick of it, Billy feared Sabine might morph into Wonder Kid, willing to take them all on.

"No, I don't want to go upstairs," Josephine said. "I never have liked going up there."

Sabine's face remained pleasant and then she smirked. Billy inhaled, fearing this would be the last straw for Sabine. He couldn't predict what her response would be.

"That's fine," Sabine said. "Billy and I will have it all to ourselves then. Old Dan and Cecil are gone, by the way." Emily shot Sabine a warning look. "I just want to let you know, in case that has anything to do with your decision. There's only positive energy up there now, and we're going to keep it that way. Everything is clean and neat. There's no place for darkness, no shadows for hiding." Sabine's hands moved in front of her, demonstrating the drama she didn't intend to tolerate. She'd laid bare the fact that the ghosts had been smudged.

Billy had listened to Sabine vent about Josephine for the last couple of months. He did so without reprimand, because he felt

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it was probably healthy for her to get her complaints out. She'd told him she wouldn't be mollycoddling Josephine when she returned, and their mother would just have to "get with the program." Now, he was afraid Sabine had the potential to completely unravel a tightly pent-up Josephine.

"That's probably enough Sabine," Billy said, winking, reacting to Ms. Emily's nervous stance.

"My, my Billy," Josephine said with a sneer. "I see you've tamed the little shrew."

"No taming necessary," Emily piped up to Sabine's defense. "Sabine has been a pleasure. She is one of the sweetest, smartest, talented, industrious children I have ever known. You will be so proud when you see all the awards she has received. Billy and I just burst with pride at the elementary assembly. Sabine was the star. I wish you could have been there, Josephine." Emily had her arms crossed over the bib of her apron. She looked with expectation at Josephine, but there was no response.

Billy felt for Ms. Emily. She'd worked so hard to make everything perfect. He'd had no idea what he'd expected, but this certainly wasn't the happy homecoming that he'd hoped for Ms. Emily.

Emily sighed, dropping her arms to her sides. "I'm sure there will be a period of adjustment for everyone. I know I will have to adjust to not having this beautiful spirit with me every

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day. I enjoyed every minute of it, Josephine. I want to thank you for trusting me to care for this precious child.”

“Well, I’m sure there will be a time of adjustment,” Josephine relented. She picked up her purse, opened it, and pulled out a package of cigarettes.

Billy and Sabine glanced at each other. Sabine’s eyebrows flew up and her lips set in a line as she must be waiting for him to say something.

Emily jumped in, “I think supper’s about ready. Y’all wash up and I’ll get it on the table. We can get this celebration started.” She hurried out of Josephine’s room and crossed the hall to the kitchen.

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoy the series!