

CHAPTER ONE
1977, CHAMBERS COUNTY, TEXAS

JOSEPHINE WAS A MURDERER, drug abuser, alcoholic, formerly promiscuous teenager, and mentally ill, but she was also a mother. She was charged with the responsibility of a child and before that child, six others. This would be the child who felt responsibility for the parent, a desire to keep her mother safe. This child has a constant yearning to know who she is. This child would have a gift.



The story is Josephine's and the family before her, but the consequence of those adult lives falls on the child with the gift, the child with the yearning and a *knowing*—Sabine.

"Where did you get off to yesterday, Sabine?" Emily asked as she set a plate of cookies down in front of Sabine on her kitchen table. "Jason came by delivering the mail and said Josephine was looking for you." Emily was curious, suspecting Sabine had gone off somewhere she shouldn't have been, otherwise Josephine would not have made mention to anyone.

It was rare to hear Josephine expressing concern. Josephine Dunn didn't normally come out of the house unless she was going to Buck's or to get her nails done. A sighting of Josephine was an uncommon event.

Sabine was a free spirit, flitting around, gently weaving herself into the lives of her neighbors. If Josephine was out looking for her, there was a reason.

"I went to see some kitties over at Dale's," Sabine answered. She had no intention of telling Mrs. Emily where she spent the day or what happened. She took a cookie from the plate and nibbled at the edges. She feared her face might betray what she hoped to conceal; maybe, the cookie could provide cover. She held it over her mouth, an attempt to hide behind it, like peeking around a post. She wanted to be able to see her inquisitor.

A cold glass of milk sat in front of her, beads of condensation slipping down onto the Formica table top. Sabine saw herself, older, sitting at the same table, watching the condensation on a glass, a glimpse of a future moment at Mrs. Emily's table. The moisture sliding down, taking her anger and the betrayal with it. Where does it go? She focused on the glass, not wanting to meet Mrs. Emily's eyes with her own. Sabine pushed a paper napkin over to the puddle collecting at the bottom of the cold drink, watching it wick the liquid away from the glass.

If she were queen of the woods today she'd erase yesterday, make it go away. Sabine wasn't the queen. The queen lived in her house and her name was Josephine. Josephine could erase things, including herself; she did it all the time.

Sabine couldn't make anything go away: not Marvin, not Dale, not Old Dan, not Wendell, not the drunk men, none of them. She had a power; she could *know* things, but she couldn't extinguish them.

"I told Jason you usually told someone when you left the house," Emily said. "I had never known you to be gone without telling someone. I think the Dawson house is too far for a girl to walk by herself. Will you promise me you won't go down there again unless you come get me? I would enjoy seeing some kittens."

"Josephine saw me leave. She saw me walk out of the yard with Dale," Sabine said. She knew Josephine was already drinking when she walked off with Dale. Marvin had already started complaining about the broken toilet and Josephine was drinking vodka. She marked time from that day—the day she understood Josephine could not and would not protect her.

"I promise, Mrs. Emily," Sabine said. "I will get you to go with me, not by myself."

"So what were the kittens doing? What color were they?" Mrs. Emily asked. *This was a trick question, a question to see if there were kittens.* Sabine had to consider what to say, because there were no kittens. It was a ruse to get Sabine to follow Dale to his house. The other boys teased him and called him "Booger".

"Well, actually, when we got there, the kittens were gone," Sabine explained, saying the word actually because adults seemed to like it when she said that word. "Jingles moved them. You know how they do, the mama moves the kittens when someone bothers them. That's what happened. They were gone." *Whew, that just popped into my mind. It was a good one, believable.*

Remy sat at her feet waiting for dropped crumbs, knowing that Sabine had no intention of sharing her experience with anyone who might take control. Sabine didn't trust things to work out. Remy knew Sabine had no confidence in the humans in her life, but Remy knew all her secrets. She couldn't figure out why humans lied; animals don't lie—they can't.

Sabine finished her snack. They played Old Maid, talking only to play the game. Mrs. Emily's questions stopped.

"Thank you Mrs. Emily. I will go home now, to my house." She wanted to make a quick exit before Mrs. Emily began the questions again. Remy walked beside her, telling Sabine in their silent language that she could trust Mrs. Emily. Sabine listened, but she thought there was nothing to be done about it now.

Sabine walked down Mrs. Emily's dirt road, the sandy loam dusting up around her feet. She wore her favorite flip-flops, dirt starting to cake again around the

bandages Mrs. Emily carefully wrapped around her toes. Sabine had a fresh bath and her hair was still drying from the shampooing Mrs. Emily had done. She also wore a new outfit. Her visit to Mrs. Emily was not all inquisition.

She looked both ways before crossing the farm to market road. There were seldom cars on the road during the day. Most of the traffic was in the morning when people went to work or after school and work, and that was almost no traffic at all.

She walked a short while down the dirt road that would turn into the drive of the house where she lived. There would be the first glimpse of the unkempt yard, tall weeds, rusty implements, bales of rusted barbed wire, discarded car batteries. Then the house could be spotted behind the tall live oaks. A stately stone building hidden behind the leafy, green curtain of oak foliage.

It was always about the house. The house possessed a personality of its own. Townspeople would tell visitors seeking the bird sanctuary, "If you get to the big, rundown place on the right surrounded by weeds, set back from the road a ways, you've gone too far." Locals knew Josephine and Sabine lived there. Few would be able to call Marvin's name. He wasn't from the area.

There was a malevolence there; it could draw you in if you were weak, make you shut down, delete your ability to reason. It did that to Josephine. It was her excuse for failing to function. Sabine thought it could also expel anyone who doubted the Dunn legacy. There were mysteries yet to be solved. Sabine knew it wasn't the house at all, it was the spirits there before Josephine, Josephine's father, Dan her mother, Nadine; her grandfather, Cecil, maybe more. The residuals of their spirits, their illnesses, their failures and disappointments hung in the house, heavy.

The Dunn house was a combination of southern plantation and castle. Sabine's great grandmother's attempt to design a statement—the vision of a poor creole girl from New Orleans. Josephine and Sabine lived in two rooms, confining themselves there, allowing the darkness to take over the others.

Most of the windows and doors were shut, never opened. The air didn't move. It was old and stale, stifling. Josephine didn't seem to notice. Sabine thought Josephine had no need for air, water, or light. She lived on a clear liquid and anything else that she could ingest to alter her existence in the receptacle of pain and memories she called home.

Sabine recognized people to be more than one thing. Their bodies had edges. The flesh stopped and space began. There was energy in that space, an energy that told a story. Sabine knew there was a higher self—a knowing. She had that knowing when she was a little girl; she could see body, energy, and souls. She could communicate with the souls of the living and dead, animals and humans. She talked to the angels and they talked back.

Knowing the spirits in the house helped Sabine coexist. Josephine struggled. She was afraid. Her fear consumed her. The queen of the woods couldn't communicate with spirit, her own or others. She was mute. Sabine tried to translate for her sometimes, but Josephine didn't get it. Her mind was fogged, forgetful, foreign, faint, fearful, fucked up . . .

Her full name is Sabine Nadine Cole, like the river in Texas. She always thought of herself as water, running wherever. She was the creek that ran behind the Dunn place, the water that pooled under her glass onto Mrs. Emily's table, the river that poured into the Gulf of Mexico and came sailing back to the Bolivar beach on the top of the waves, mixed with salty tears. There was no way to harness her. She and Remy were free spirits, wandering, neither of them attached to their designated homes.

Sabine's mother, the queen of the woods, was Josephine Cecilia Dunn. Sabine thought her job in life was to protect Josephine, but she was wrong. Josephine was past protection before Sabine ever knew her. Sometimes, she felt out of control, doubting her own gifts, raging on the inside, desiring control, but helpless. She took shelter there, in the *knowing*, and used it to help her negotiate the madness. The other souls were the dependable ones. The living humans weren't much help, except Mrs. Emily. Mrs. Emily was dependable, a tangible safe harbor.

Mrs. Emily asked about where she was. She would not go there again. Sabine was four years old the first time she remembered being molested. That was the day she would erase. If she could erase that day, yesterday, then maybe she could erase a few that came after that. The queen was still on her throne, long live the queen.