

Josephine's Journals, Book Two of the Sabine Trilogy, Sample Chapter

Josephine's note lets me know she doesn't blame me, and she tells me she loves me. I am glad I read it. At first, I avoided reading it, waiting until I was alone, in bed. Dread is what I felt, not wanting to know Josephine's thoughts before suicide. What could she tell me? What could she possibly say to me? I often stared at her as she slept, "Say something," I would say. She never did. I could not figure her out. She refused to say anything to me to let me know who she was. I hope she has found the peace she has been looking for, but I have a restless feeling, telling me she has not left. She is stuck.

I was afraid I might have pushed her over the edge when I confronted her about her friend, Earl, trying to get in my bedroom. It had been a horrific night, with him wandering around the upstairs hall, pulling the telephone cord, and cutting it from the other side of my locked door. In the darkness of night I was terrified, watching the clock until dawn, when I sneaked through my bathroom and got my bow and arrow to threaten the son of a bitch. He was still drunk, giving me the confidence to fire off an arrow into his dangling sock. Augie helped too, charging him, biting at him, until I called her off.

I really wanted to kill him. That's what scared me, turning into someone who could do violence to another person. It was infuriating. I blamed Josephine for continuing to bring drunks and drug users into the house that Billy, Mrs. Emily, and I had worked so hard to restore and make a home. She allowed those derelicts to come back, after promising she wouldn't and so close after Billy's death. I could not stand it any longer, so I confronted her, and she promised me she would stop it, for good. The only way she could stop the madness was to end her own life. Josephine always was extreme like that. Either she was flying under the radar, trying to disappear into sadness and malingering, or wham, she was center stage in all her finery, commanding attention. Drama was her middle name; that was Josephine Dunn.

I didn't anticipate how angry I would be, not just with Josephine, but myself, Billy, Mrs. Emily, everyone. It crawled over me creating a restless energy that made no sense. I felt as if I needed to jump up and down in pouring rain to wash away the discontent. There was no answer. It was just there. Mrs. Emily said it was part of grief. I knew grief; it had come to me before, snuck up on me, pounded me on the head. I lost my favorite souls in the whole world. This was Josephine; I had wished for her death almost every day of my life. I had not expected to feel.

I never figured Josephine out, but she left some journals she kept since childhood, and I have the key to her trunk, so I plan to read them and get an idea about how life shaped her, the person who gave birth to me. I already have some knowledge of her abusive childhood, because I am sensitive to souls. I know the house we have lived in all these years is full of souls that cannot, or will not, move on. Nadine, Josephine's mother, was a guiding spirit for me when I was very little, but she started withdrawing when Josephine started receding into her illness. The negative spirits, I could avoid or confront, but Josephine was terrified and controlled by them, her father, Old Dan, and her grandfather, Cecil. They were malicious, but they were nothing compared to the two guys

who didn't have the courage to show themselves to me. I hope I can figure out who they were and why they are still here, still in the Dunn place, drawn to Josephine.

I think those negative spirits are only tied to Josephine. They are not Dunns. I am sure Josephine collected negative spirit like cat hair on a black sweater. She was a magnet for malady. I suspect she unknowingly conjures poltergeist. She would never accept that, but I think she continues to do it over and over. When she leaves, is hospitalized, or out of the house, they are dormant. Maybe they follow her. I don't know. I will try to understand. Truth could not find Josephine, but disorder and woe were her associates, her constants, dependable and predictable for her, but alarming for her offspring. I knew I wasn't the only child of Josephine distracted by her chaos. She had given birth to seven children. I just happened to be the last. The only one living with her after her thirty-four insupportable years.

Josephine and I lived in squalor in the Dunn house, until she finally had a breakdown and had to be hospitalized when I was seven years old. We lived in filth in two rooms of a three-story mansion, never going upstairs, throwing my clothes away when they got dirty or past dirty. It's all I knew until the sheriff drove her off to the hospital. I went across the road to live with my best friend, Mrs. Emily. She taught me everything I needed to know to survive Josephine.

Billy came back home. He helped me too. He planted the most gorgeous garden, painted, and taught me how to deal with Josephine, but the best thing he did was love me and bring me Augie, my dog. Billy will always be my big brother, even though he died in a tragic accident not long before Josephine killed herself. Billy and his best friend, Jared, are my true role models. If I can live like they did, I will be just fine. Billy came back to the Dunn house as my brother and I wanted him so desperately, I accepted him. Mrs. Emily wanted him too. She and I marveled at the brother he was. He was perfection.

Mrs. Emily and I have made the plans to have Josephine cremated. We are sure that's what she would want. I suppose it is appropriate to consider what Josephine would want. It is one of the few times I have ever wanted to pacify her. I have the summer to go through Josephine's trunk, her jewelry box, and read her journals. Mrs. Emily wants to clean Josephine's room again and air it out. I will help her with that, then I will make myself a good reading spot there and start deciphering. I can't be in her room until it's cleansed and open to fresh air. Josephine entertained her drinking buddies in her room. It smelled like the dirtiest bar I had ever peeked into, looking for Josephine. She never noticed. She liked it dark and dirty. Somehow that stagnant stench was comforting to her. Maybe that Tatu perfume that clung to her distorted her sniffer.

I plan to keep the garden at the Dunn house. Billy and I worked assiduously to keep it nice, so I will continue that, because I love the way it looks and I enjoy gardening. Working in the garden helps me get my mind straight and keeps my imagination from getting the best of me. I have made a plan. I will garden in the morning, when it's not too hot, then I'll move into the air conditioning and read. By noon the heat and humidity are almost unbearable in southeast Texas.

Mrs. Emily wants me to go to summer camp and get out of town for a while, but I have been twice. I enjoyed it, but now I want to get ready to go back to high school and figure out who,

exactly, my mother was. I will be thirteen when school starts because I skipped fifth grade. I'm younger than my classmates, but I have had many life experiences they may never have. I think Mrs. Emily worries about talk around town concerning Josephine's suicide. That doesn't bother me because I am used to that attention. A few days before Josephine's death, she shaved her head, for heaven's sakes. It wasn't a nice, even, shave either. It was a mess. Josephine had the kind of face and perfectly shaped head that could have pulled off bald, but she did a terrible shave job and then painted her face with makeup, like a clown. It was not attractive. Worrisome, Mrs. Emily called her behavior.

I'm used to stories about Josephine. Some of them are true, and many were false. The biggest gossip in town could not make up a story any worse than Josephine's darkest secrets. That was her biggest fear. Her claim to fame was her beauty, and she truly was one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. She had thick, wavy, auburn hair (before she shaved her head), big green eyes framed by dark lashes, perfectly arched brows, a delicate nose and naturally plump, pouty lips. She attracted the most negative bunch of testosterone on the planet. It seemed her criteria was: massive ego, dependence on alcohol or any other drug, and a preference for fondling children. She would also accept blatant racism, adulterers, and hypocrites posing as pillars of the community. In my opinion, she was all show and no substance. Most of my life I wanted to set fire to her name. I hoped her journals would convince me otherwise. Since I wasn't sure who my father was, it would be nice to know my maternal parent had some redeeming value.

Value, to Josephine, is monetary, or land. Character has nothing to do with anything. Her value system was a major part of her problem. She bought her so-called friends with vodka, and at the end of a drunken day and night, they would all open their bleary eyes and not even recognize each other. Josephine rarely knew their names. She knew a few regulars, but they started dropping off toward the end. Even the most hard core could see the danger that surrounded Josephine.

There was a note with the name of an attorney in Houston in Josephine's suicide envelope. I contacted him and he asked me to come see him with my guardian and to bring the death certificate. Mrs. Emily and I visited his office. Mr. Holmes was thorough and verified all information I provided him. He had also been thorough with Josephine, which is a monumental achievement. He was aware of Mrs. Emily and knew Josephine would have approved of her as a guardian for me. He said they had discussed it. I got the feeling Josephine visited him shortly before she committed suicide. We met with him for hours and when we left, we knew that Josephine was a multimillionaire with a monthly oil and gas production income of at least \$100,000 each month during good oil prices. It fell to \$45,000 each month during bad times. You could hardly feel sorry for Josephine's financial status during hard times. She had an accountant who was affiliated with Mr. Holmes, Mrs. Anderson, who handled payment of income taxes and other bills. Eighty percent of Josephine's income was invested and as much as possible had been sheltered from taxes. I was slightly impressed that Josephine was able to pay attention to such things, but it fit with what she valued most. She didn't spend much on the house, food or my clothing. All that must have been

invested. Her major expenses were her clothing and vodka. Her regular boyfriend, Wendell, kept her stocked in Mexican vanilla and that horrid Tatu.

“You are a rich young lady,” Mr. Holmes assured me. “Your mother trusted this firm and our associates to handle her finances and we have been good stewards. I hope we can continue to be of service to you.” He stood up indicating we were at the end of the meeting. He basically wanted me to know that everything belonging to Josephine was now mine. He had given me a detailed accounting and made sure I understood what was happening. “Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you,” he said. “We will be happy to make any adjustments in the current operation that suits you.”

Mrs. Emily and I were stunned. We had no idea what to say or do. I shook hands and told Mr. Holmes it was nice to meet him. “I will do some research,” I told him. “I’m new at this and I don’t have much information. I say we continue with things the way they are now. If I get any new information, I will get in touch. Thank you for your time.”

“That will be fine, Ms. Cole,” Mr. Holmes said, flashing a big grin. “We will continue to have the monthly checks deposited in the same bank, but they will be made to you. You are already on the account with Josephine. You will need your guardian to act with you on withdrawals, etc.”

Mrs. Emily and I left Mr. Holmes’ office and went straight to our favorite ice cream parlor and got a banana split to celebrate Josephine’s generosity and my fortune. I thought to myself, this is a value, Josephine, generosity. It was wasted on me, however, because I had no idea how much money I had just inherited. Billy left me a bunch of money, too. I didn’t know what to do with it, so I contacted a university to setup a scholarship. Mrs. Emily helped me with that. Every year I will get applications to review and select recipients. It is something I think Billy would appreciate. When I get older, I’ll consider where this money can do the most good. Right now, I think I’ll just leave it be. I suppose I could have bought that ice cream parlor and had all the banana splits I wanted. I considered that would really piss Josephine off. It would serve no other purpose, so I released the thought. Now, more than ever, I needed to have good intentions.

I didn’t even know Josephine had money until I was twelve years old. The conditions we lived in and the teasing I got in school led me to believe we were dirt poor. Yes, we lived in a big house, but it was neglected with a yard full of rusted stuff, old tires and weeds. I always thought rich people had shiny, new stuff. I had limited access to television, so I never got to see anything to use as a comparison. In that way, I was sheltered, but in every other way, I was naked to the elements. I even slept outside sometimes, behind the cistern, while Josephine entertained her derelict friends in our filthy house. I didn’t even know enough to be embarrassed by it.

Mrs. Emily has always been my protector. She probably would have done more if I had confided in her. I kept the secrets of the Dunn house. I didn’t figure out until later that I should have told someone what I was living through. I wasn’t the kind of little kid who you wanted to snuggle up to and get to know. Awkward, stand-offish, and weird were words the teachers used to describe me. My hygiene was not consistent and I seldom had a lunch or lunch money unless Mrs. Emily was paying attention. By the time I got old enough to figure it out, Josephine was in the

hospital and Mrs. Emily had stepped in to support me. Cleanliness, Josephine, and truth, those are values.