

Secrets of Dunn House, Book Three of the Sabine Trilogy, Sample Chapter

There was a presence in the upstairs hall when Sabine reached the top of the stairs. At first she thought it was Josephine, but then she decided it wasn't, too many traits did not fit Nadine or Josephine. She knew it was a female. It was not Nadine, Sabine's grandmother. Nadine had a gentle, protective spirit. This presence was not pleasant. There was a fateful, possessive feeling about it. Sabine stood quietly in the dark hall, partial moon light beginning to lighten the balcony and filter through the French doors, trying to decipher who it could be. She was sure she had not met this spirit before. It was someone new, just arrived, maybe not just arrived but latent before, hiding, waiting. Sabine was convinced it was one of the Dunn women.

Opening the French doors to the balcony, Sabine walked out, breathing in the cool night air, leaving the doors ajar. The rainy, humid day had given way to a cool, dry evening. The wind shifted. The breezes, normally from the southeast, bringing Gulf moisture, were flowing from the northwest now. The crisp, cool days of winter would only last until the breezes shifted again. A sweater in the morning would quickly be thrown aside by late morning. The flip-flops and shorts were never stored away. She walked to the edge of the railing and looked over at the circular drive in the front of the house. There was an owl hooting in the distance and Augie held her nose in the air, sniffing the wind. Sabine was silent as Augie predicted a beautiful day for Saturday, an outside day, good for chasing rabbits and that feral cat. Sabine chuckled at Augie. "I thought you were supposed to live in the moment, Augie," Sabine joked. "Sounds like you have jumped ahead to the future."

“I am enjoying this moment now,” Augie responded. “However, I know you are thinking about the weather tomorrow, wondering how you will fill your time. I’m with you, Sabine. We will always find a way to fill our time, rain or shine. I’m a fan of naps, as you know.”

Sabine laughed aloud. “Yes, you are the Queen of Naps, Augie. I like a good nap, too. When we get the horses, we can be the Queens of the Woods. We will go on adventures, find new trails. . . There I go, living in the future again.”

“That’s what I like about you, Sabine,” Augie assured. “You are a dreamer with a big imagination. I can live vicariously through your dreams and nap at the same time.”

“Ha! You are too much Augie. Jared used to say that, live vicariously. I guess we all do that, huh. Well, humans do it. I guess your species is perfectly satisfied with what you have at the moment.”

“That’s true, unless we are hungry, then we hunt, but I have to say being domesticated is a convenience I enjoy. I don’t take it for granted. Hunting is a hobby now, you know. There is no need to kill. I can chase for exercise.”

“That’s good to know, Augie. Your ego doesn’t get in the way. You are not going out killing and mounting little rabbit and cat heads. I have noticed Jimbo has given up hunting. He used to hunt birds. I wonder what changed his routine.”

“He used to fill his free time with male friends who encouraged hunting,” Augie responded. “He has you and Emily now. His interests have shifted. We all evolve. The most adaptable evolve in a positive way. They survive. It’s not good or bad, just is.”

“Oh, Augie, you are such a philosopher.”

“No philosophy to it, Sabine,” Augie sighed. “It just is. Sometimes you humans think too hard, trying to assign good or bad to things in your mind to justify some auspicious tradition. The universe doesn’t recognize that stuff. You are talking to yourselves.”

Sabine sat down in one of the rockers on the balcony, enjoying the cool breeze. Augie looked up toward the door. Following Augie’s gaze, Sabine saw a faint dark figure pass over the threshold and onto the balcony. She set her intention to communicate with the spirit. Augie glanced at Sabine, telling her it was useless. Augie let Sabine know this spirit was twice as hard headed as Josephine and did not plan to reveal herself. She did confirm the spirit was female and related to her. Sabine decided it could only be Elizabeth LeDoux Dunn, her great grandmother. She called Elizabeth by name, out loud. Augie cautioned Sabine not to be so familiar with the unknown. “It’s like approaching a stranger, Sabine. You just don’t do it. You let them come to you. You know all spirits do not have good intentions. Some have power you don’t want to experience. Leave it be.” Augie sometimes acted as an interpreter for Sabine. Some spirits were easier to communicate with than others. This one presented a challenge for Sabine, but Augie seemed to know something.

Sabine would honor Augie’s caution. There was no reason not to. Augie was always right and had an ability to communicate that Sabine did not have with this spirit. She would wait and see if Elizabeth would warm to her or reveal herself. Augie seemed to be wary. It would be wise to wait and see what happened. Sabine had seen spirits since she was very young and often was able to communicate with them. The presence did not make her fearful. However, she noticed, if the spirit didn’t want it, she could not force an interaction. They had the will in these exchanges and the message.

Josephine was the only spirit Sabine had interacted with who needed information instead of dispensing it. Sabine suspected it was because Josephine had no idea she and her soul were one and the same. That was a guess, she couldn't be sure. She just kept putting information out in hopes that Josephine could grasp what she needed. Josephine had not been easy to communicate with in life or death. Spirits were always open to Augie. They left the balcony door open and went into Sabine's room to get ready for bed. Augie settled into her bed while Sabine read for a while, propped up on plush pillows. She finally became drowsy and turned off her lamp, settling in to sleep and dream.

Elizabeth Dunn stood in the Dunn house kitchen, scolding Dan. He was about nine years old. She was a young, beautiful woman. Her hair swept up in loose curls, spilling down one side of her face, tendrils fixed on her neck with perspiration. Her son had tracked mud in the hallway on his new boots. Elizabeth had Dan standing barefoot at the end of the table with his hands on the tabletop, palms turned upward. She had a wooden spoon in her hand, raised above her head. Her eyes were wild with tears and she was screeching at Dan--he had no respect for cleanliness. Other words were delivered, but they were in her Creole tongue, unknown to Daniel or the dreamer. She delivered a full-strength blow to Dan's upturned palms. Because he flinched and pulled one of his hands away, she made him replace his hands and continued hitting him until she was tired of swinging the spoon. Elizabeth, exhausted, grasped the edge of the table and leaned against it, putting the spoon down. She stared at Daniel with moist, haunting eyes. Dan stood, defiant, glaring at her. His brother, Ethan, watched from the butler's pantry door, cracked open, just enough to watch Daniel's punishment. When Elizabeth looked up, spying Ethan she began chasing after him. He swung the door, hitting her in the face, catching her hand between the door and the door frame. Dan took the opportunity to run out the back door while Ethan ran

out the front. Both boys left Elizabeth screaming in pain, threatening to get them good when Cecil got home. She screamed, cursing in English and Creole.

Ethan ran around the front of the house and then turned down the side and ran toward the cistern and windmill, meeting Dan there. Dan rubbed his red palms, checking the movement of his fingers. They sat smoking cigarettes taken from Cecil's dresser. There was a large yellow lab sitting beside them. Ethan called the dog, "Ralph." Sabine could clearly see the boys smoking and glancing around the cistern to see if Elizabeth was coming out the back door. They were drenched in sweat, wiping it from their foreheads with their sleeves. At the same time, Sabine could see Elizabeth with a bottle, sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. She looked exactly like Josephine in the same pose. She had the same thick, dark auburn hair, clear green eyes and slight build. She obviously overreacted to Dan's muddy boots and was so distraught she had resorted to drinking in the middle of the day. In her dream state, Sabine recognized the legacy of Josephine through Josephine's grandmother.

The scene shifted, Elizabeth was in the living room, seated at the piano with a little girl. She was pointing to sheet music with a long pencil. When the child missed a note, Elizabeth swatted her knuckles with the pencil. There was a fan on the floor blowing the music. Elizabeth struggled to hold the pages with one hand and swat with the other. Her boys were running on the front porch, squawking and looking in the tall windows into the living room, taunting Elizabeth's student. Sabine could feel the frustration and overwhelming confusion of Elizabeth, at a loss about how to intervene with boyish pranks. Then she lay in bed, dressed in gauzy, fabrics of many prints and colors. Her wrists stacked with bracelets. A colorful scarf tied loosely around her head, concealing the front part of her hair. Cecil sat alone in the kitchen with the bottle, while the boys ran around the yard with Ralph, their yelps and calls audible through the open windows.

Sabine woke at two in the morning. She recorded the dream in her journal. She decided Elizabeth had shown her how she and her family lived in the house. Sabine suspected Elizabeth was the source of the illness that plagued Josephine. There was the same feeling of helpless melancholy. She seemed to be abusive and also appeared to have a drinking problem. The house was her pride and joy and she was particular about how it was kept. The perfection she arranged carefully with the fabrics and furnishings she collected on her travels, she was unable to maintain while tending to two rambunctious boys. Their active monkeyshines could not be contained in her carefully planned mansion, and she did not have the patience or wherewithal to divert their activity. Cecil was no help in occupying the boys. There was a distance there. Maybe it was disinterest or possibly the lethargy of alcohol, but he wasn't there. Sabine considered the ranch and the Dunn house would be the perfect place to occupy two young boys. There were endless adventures to be had, but neither Cecil nor Elizabeth possessed the creativity or desire to encourage their children. Sad, Sabine thought. There were so many things they could have enjoyed in the woods, down by the creek, out in the fields.

Augie woke and added her comments; there is no tolerance for a dog inside the house, and the use of tobacco was always allowed. According to Augie, Elizabeth wanted dogs banned and smoking allowed in the present. She complained to Augie that Sabine made a rule about no smoking inside the house. Elizabeth was also unhappy about the new décor. She did not like the windows uncovered, the outside visible. She felt it should be secure and closed, desiring darkness and cooling shadows. She longed for them, wanting places to hide. She liked the dim, shuttered rooms of her cottage in New Orleans. Elizabeth told Augie she wanted to recreate that in the Dunn house. Sabine spoiled it. She was, in Elizabeth's view, a coconspirator with Daniel and Ethan, sabotaging Elizabeth's beautiful plans.

“Why has she come back now, Augie?” Sabine questioned. “She has not been here all this time, and now she turns up and starts giving me these dreams.”

“She does not have positive intentions, Sabine,” Augie said. “She wants to regain control. This is her house. She built it.”

Sabine rolled over in bed, facing away from Augie. She considered her great grandmother, Elizabeth LeDoux Dunn. She knew Elizabeth was from New Orleans, but that was all she knew about her. Elizabeth and Cecil Dunn built the Dunn house just after their marriage. They had two sons, Ethan and Daniel. Ethan moved away to go to college and never returned. Daniel, Sabine’s grandfather, never left, dying in the house before he was fifty years old. According to journals kept by Josephine, Dan probably had lung cancer and problems with his liver. Sabine also recalled Josephine recording in her journals that Dan’s hands were arthritic, often causing him pain and difficulty with his grip. Dropping things often, he complained of many broken fingers, never tended by a doctor when he was a child. Sabine originally thought Ethan moved to San Francisco and died there, but she knew from clues in his bird book and dreams, Ethan returned to the Dunn ranch in 1962 and was killed by Daniel, his brother. She did not know why her grandfather killed his brother. That was still a mystery.

Sabine considered why Elizabeth would return now, making her presence known and letting Augie know she didn’t like the changes made to the house. Even in vision, Elizabeth was different than the other spirits Sabine had witnessed. She was a brittle, rigid presence, thin and splintery, like the wooden spoon she wielded above her head, striking Dan’s palms. She was not flowing, ethereal and misty, like Nadine, but moved like a Nazi soldier, marching in a regimen, head jerking toward the observers of a staged military parade. Sabine resolved to look through photographs to see if she could identify Elizabeth. She supposed she would be an unsmiling

likeness, with sharp features. She was sure she had seen her in photos before. Sabine thought the house had an exaggerated importance, Elizabeth holding it to herself as a symbol of some kind. Perhaps her circumstances before meeting Cecil were bleak in New Orleans. Maybe she came from limited means and the house . . . Sabine fell asleep thinking about Elizabeth Catherine LeDoux Dunn.