

AT THE END OF MAGNOLIA STREET: FIVE CHAPTERS OF SOUTHERN  
MAGICAL REALISM WITH A CRAFT ESSAY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University of  
Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Master of Arts: English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

August 2019

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## ABSTRACT

“At the End of Magnolia Street” is a magical realism novel set in a fictional rural town in Middle Tennessee, taking place from the early 1990s through the 2000s. The novel explores the challenges a family can both create and endure together, following the lives of two girls as they struggle through difficult childhoods, living under the shadow of shared family history, and a fatal curse that has haunted the town for generations. The narrative alternates between Noble Williams and Liberty Allen as they struggle with unique abilities, ostracization, loss, guilt, and the need for the love and support of their family while simultaneously trying to escape the restrictions of their roots. My craft essay explores the use of counterpointed characterization to create conflict and tension as well as to develop and progress plot based upon Charles Baxter's essay “Counterpointed Characterization” and exploring works that have influenced my own writing.

## DEDICATION

To all those I lost, who taught me about grief and guilt, and to all those I love, who taught me that pain fades but love never does.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank everyone who helped make this dream a reality. Dr. Sarah Einstein, who not only encouraged me to pursue a Master's degree after I thought my life had fallen apart, but who made sure I would have all the resources available to do so, while also pulling me out of my comfort zone. A very special thanks to Professor Sybil Baker, who has been the most understanding and supportive committee chair anyone could hope for, for her endless patience and clarity, for helping me become the type of writer who could write this piece and importantly for helping me discover Lucy, a character that has helped and led me in more ways than I could have imagined. I'm also grateful to Professor Earl Braggs, who is easily the most calming person I know and whose words always inspire, and for Professor Thomas Balázs, who always makes sure fantasy writers have a voice at UTC.

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PART I

CRAFT ESSAY: FINDING YOURSELF IN THE SHADOWS – COUNTERPOINTED

CHARACTERIZATION AND THE SHADOW-SELF IN *BASTARD*

*OUT OF CAROLINA, SULA, AND FAITHFUL*



Aristotle asserted in his *Poetics* that after plot, characters are the most important element of a story. While he is referring to theater, Aristotle's argument can extend to all aspects of storytelling, including novels, which often include complex character that drive the story. In his essay, "Counterpointed Characterization," Charles Baxter argues that counterpointed characterization occurs when "certain kinds of people are pushed together, people who bring out a crucial response to each other. A latent energy rises to the surface, the desire or secret previously forced down into psychic obscurity" (88). Baxter goes on to give examples of how counterpointed characterization can contribute to the plot of a narrative, often replacing conflict as a means of generating tension. Like Baxter, I believe tension in a novel can be developed not only through external forces but through counterpointed characterization, which heightens emotion and what is at stake. For this essay, I will apply Baxter's concept of counterpointed characterization to three novels I have used as models for my own work: Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and Alice Hoffman's *Faithful*. Before discussing Baxter's essay, I'll review how the concept of characterization has evolved in Western literature, building on Aristotle's, E.M. Forster's, and James Wood's explanations of round and flat characters, before examining how several key examples of counterpointed characterization shape the novels mentioned, as well as *At the End of Magnolia Street*.

While Aristotle argues in his *Poetics* that plot is the true heart of drama, he also suggests that characters should support and drive the narrative, carrying the story through the inciting conflict, the rising action, into the climax and finally, to the story's resolution. He states that "all states of character differ in vice and virtue" (20). While Aristotle discusses characters in terms of Greek drama with its clearly drawn protagonists and antagonists, this form of characterization has also been applied to fiction. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster defines round characters

as those who are complex and inconsistent, and flat characters as those who do not change throughout the novel (Forster 67). When I consider Forster's views on character in relation to Baxter's essay, I believe that the inclusion of flat characters can be a way to generate counterpointed characterization with a round character. For example, at one point in *Faithful*, the main character, Shelby, encounters a homeless person using two drugged dogs to successfully play on passerby's emotions (Hoffman 41). Shelby takes the dogs to save them from a life of abuse, and her interaction with the homeless person serves to reveal an aspect of Shelby's character by having her interact with a flat character that does not appear again in the story. Conversely, James Wood examines Forster's classification of round and flat characters with a critical eye, stating "It is subtlety that matters – subtlety of analysis, of inquiry, of concern, of felt pressure – and for subtlety a very small point of entry will do." (120). Wood's addition to characterization provides a depth that examining characters as simply round or flat does not, implying that it is not only the type of character, but how the characters interact with each other that is important to the narrative. Building off of E. M. Forster's definition of round and flat characters – that flat characters "are constructed round a single idea or quality" and that "when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" – and adding in Wood's basis of subtlety, interaction, and "felt pressure" we can begin to examine how characters, both flat and complex, can not only be acted upon by outside forces but can also be put together in situations in which their very interactions progress the plot (Forster 67, Wood 120).

In his essay "Counterpointed Characterization," Baxter explores a new perspective when it comes to characterization, that by creating characters who counterpoint each other, authors can not only create and build tension but also a create a crucial response between characters,

revealing true natures and desires. Baxter calls this pairing of seemingly opposing characters counterpointed characterization, which he defines in his essay as follows:

Plot often develops out of the tensions between characters and in order to get that tension, a writer . . . [creates] characters who counterpoint one another in ways that are fit for gossip . . . With counterpointed characterization, certain kinds of people are pushed together, people who bring out a crucial response to each other. (88)

Baxter further empathizes that the relationships and conflicts between characters in successful narratives are usually complex, and not at all unitary, flat, or generalized; even a relationship between flat characters can be complicated and generate conflict. According to Baxter two differing characters who are not necessarily protagonists or antagonists or flat or round, but merely dissimilar people placed in a situation can cause them to contrast. This tension helps generate and progress the plot. We can observe how novels like *Sula*, *Bastard out of Carolina*, and *Faithful* drive their narratives through counterpointed characters. In other words, characters create a critical response in each other to generate conflict, develop character, foreshadow future scenes, and progress the plot. Counterpointed characterization helps make these novels enjoyable and believable, while creating depth and evoking an emotional response.

As Baxter starts his in-depth discussion of counterpointed characterization with family dynamics, it makes sense then to begin my own analysis with Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*. As a brief summary, *Bastard out of Carolina* is a first person coming of age narrative set in Greenville, South Carolina, in the 1950s. The primary conflict is between the narrator, Bone, and her abusive stepfather, Glen, as well as the relationships between Bone and other family

members, such as her mother, Annie. When it comes to counterpointed characterization in a family setting, Baxter says:

The concept of ‘family values’ is inherently rigid and inflexible. It’s meant to stop thought. Good fiction and theater usually assume that ‘family values’ should be in some kind of interesting uproar . . . the family as a subject has given tremendous energy to the novel and to the theater, and that energy has often arisen from counterpointed or incompatible family values (89-90)

In reference to Bone and Glen in particular, one line from Baxter’s essay stands out, “Stories often arise when two characters who hardly belong together are forced to inhabit the same frame of reference, as they often must in families” (90). For example, Glen marries Bone’s mother, bringing him and Bone together, making Glen’s physical and sexual abuse towards Bone even more dramatic. That Bone was abused roughly between the ages of eight and thirteen is obscene and gut-wrenching for the reader. Allison’s use of counterpointed characterization to have Bone’s abuser be both a part of her own family and a reflection of her own character, and to have Bone’s mother unwilling to acknowledge the abuse because she is clinging to the fantasy of a perfect family, heightens the reader’s emotional response to the abuse, providing a heartbreaking narrative arch and conclusion to the novel.

In some instances, it can seem like Glen and Bone are alike. They are both angry, they are both abused, and they both crave love. Glen desperately craves the love and adoration of all those around him, particularly his father who has always made it clear how disappointed he is in his son, his choices, and his inability to hold down a job. While it is never clear if Glen’s father beat him, it can be fairly assumed from the way he treats Bone, and it does seem clear that at the very least, Glen was emotionally and verbally abused by his unloving father and harbors a deep

anger and sense of inadequacy. Bone struggles with her own sense of self-worth, stemming partially from her mother's anger about Bone's birth certificate bearing the mark "bastard" and their community's opinion that their family is "white trash." There is something about Bone, a fire, a stubbornness, a look she has, that brings out a violent response in him, and in return Glen's abusive and cowardly personality brings out a deep rooted anger and darkness in Bone. Shortly after the beatings and abuse start in earnest, Bone observes:

Sometimes when I looked up into his red features and blazing eyes, I knew that it was nothing I had done that made him beat me. It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine. I was evil. Of course I was. I admitted it to myself, locked my fingers into fists, and shut my eyes to everything I did not understand (110)

Glen craves love from all of those around him, and Bone, a quiet child who has already lost one stepfather, is not able to even fake affection for Glen, stating "Love, at least love for a man not already part of the family, was something I was a little unsure about" (32).

Not only does Glen want to be loved, but when it comes to Annie, he wants to be the main recipient of her affections. According to the Bone's great aunts, "Yeah, Glen loves Anney. He loves her like a gambler loves a fast racehorse or a desperate man loves whisky. That kind of love eats a man up" (41). Glen's love is as destructive to Bone as it is for himself. He becomes deeply jealous of Annie's love for Bone, who is not his child, and resentful of Annie's inability to have any further children, depriving him of the son he has always wanted. All of these character traits serve to counterpoint with Bone who is desperate for love in a quiet way, unwilling or unable to put on a mask to please others and seemingly unaware or uncaring of how deeply strange she is. Bone's internal struggle to cope with this anger and violence within her is

one of the main elements that drives the plot. She tells strange stories about murdering sisters to her cousins, reads explicit sex books, has sexual fantasies about a huge old hook found in the river, and breaks into the local grocery store whose owner, in Bone's mind, had wronged her, smashing everything inside. All the strange stories she tells, the books she reads, the hook, the breaking and entering, and the violent sexual fantasies, stem from this counterpointed characterization between herself and Glen, which he expresses by being violent and abusive towards Bone, eventually, raping her. As a result, Bone's desire to be safe and away from Glen conflicts with her mother's desire to continue to stay with Glen, which creates another instance of counterpointed characterization, one which ultimately drives mother and daughter apart.

Even more perverse and heartbreaking is the counterpointed characterization developed in the strained relationship between Bone and her mother, Annie. Allison uses the reader's expectation of what a relationship between a mother and daughter should be like to generate even greater tension in the novel. Even the characters of Bone and Annie feel that Annie should put Bone first in her life before Glen, that she should leave her abusive husband for the good of her child. But she doesn't. Baxter describes this kind of counterpointed characterization as one that exposes "elements that are kept secret in a personality, so that the mask over that personality . . . falls, either temporarily or permanently." (88) This is certainly one of her strongest desires, for herself and her children to be safe and happy, as she states during her final encounter with Bone:

"I know," she said. "I know you must feel like I don't love you, like I didn't love you enough."

She took hold of her own shoulders, hugging herself and shivering as if she were cold. "Bone, I never wanted you to be hurt. I wanted you to be safe. I

wanted us all to be happy. I never thought it would go the way it did. I never thought Glen would hurt you like that.”

Mama shut her eyes and turned her head as if she could no longer stand to look into my face. Her mouth opened and closed several times. I saw tears at the corners of her eyes.

“And I just loved him. You know that. I just loved him so I couldn’t see him that way. I couldn’t believe. I couldn’t imagine...” (306)

Here we see Annie’s mask, as mother and wife, fall, and she is exposed for who she is. Her relationship with Glen reveals her to be the kind of person who would chose an abuser, a rapist, over her own child. This use of counterpointed characterization, Annie’s desire to be with Glen winning out over Bone’s desire to be with her mother, and to be safe and happy, to regain the innocence of her childhood, is what brings the story to its resolution, as heart wrenching and unsatisfying as it is – that Annie will abandon her daughter to be with Glen, and Bone, who has been broken and battered, will be raised by her aunt and have to live with the trauma and violence of her childhood without the support or love of her mother.

When it comes to counterpointed characterization in novels, Baxter has this to say: “Call it fate, or call it arrangements, but in stories of counterpointed character I often have the sense of unseen hands pushing people together for narrative purposes” (91). One example of how well “fate” pushes counterpointed characters together to create drama and conflict is Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, about Nel and Sula, two characters with differing desires. Nel is raised under a strict roof, her mother instilling in her the belief that happiness and success can only be gained by getting married, having babies, and keeping a house, while Sula is raised without rules, is accountable to no one but herself, and only desires to be happy and free. Nel is prudish, polite, and has a strong

sense of right and wrong, black and white. She cares more about what other people think about her than what she thinks about herself. Sula falls more under the mindset to have standards, not morals – she does what she wants, when she wants, regardless of what anyone else thinks. In Morrison’s own words:

Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality. Although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes (52)

One of the greatest examples of this occurs in the chapter entitled “1922” in which the girls find themselves being stalked and harassed by four white boys. They catch Nel one day and “pushed her from hand to hand until they grew tired of the frightened helpless face” (53). Here we see that Nel, while more consistent, is also a victim. Sula’s reaction to the same situation is much different however. When face with the same conflict, Sula takes how a knife and cuts off the tip of her finger, saying to the boys, “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you” (54). Nel is the one who has been raised in what some would consider to be the right way, however she is unable to even stand up for herself, while Sula, who has not been raised with any particular rules or parenting in place, is able to put a stop to the boys’ harassment quickly and definitely. This very early use of counterpointed characterization in the novel shows the reader what kind of characters Nel and Sula are and establishes the main conflict: how Nel continues to allow herself to be victimized and Sula continues to be a volatile but strong character who does what she wants to achieve her goals. Growing up, these two girls are best friends, but as they grow into womanhood, their desires pull, and eventually wrench, them apart.



The division between the two begins in their childhood with the death of the little boy Chicken Little, who Sula accidentally hurls into the river where he drowns. They don't tell anyone, even after the boy's disfigured body is found. In fact, Nel is the first to speak after Chicken Little disappears, two words that crack the foundation of their friendship: "Somebody saw" (60). This is further supported during Chicken Little's funeral, when we see that "Nel and Sula did not touch hands or look at each other during the funeral. There was a space, a separateness, between them. . . [Nel] expected the sheriff or Reverend Deal's pointing finger any moment" (64). Even during this time of mourning, Nel's thoughts are on people knowing, on what others think of her, while "Sula simply cried" (64). It is no coincidence that the next in-depth scene with Nel and Sula is Nel's wedding to Jude, one in which "selected [Nel] away from Sula" (83). Sula is just as excited about the wedding and helps plan it, so that "She encouraged Mrs. Wright to go all out, even to borrowing Eva's punch bowl. In fact, she handled most of the details very efficiently, capitalizing on the fact that most people were anxious to please her. . . ." (84). However, Nel's devotion has transferred almost completely to Jude, as he is the next thing to fulfill her desire of wanting to keep up appearances, so that she doesn't stop Sula from leaving her wedding early and disappearing for ten years.

While Sula's reasoning for keeping Chicken Little's death a secret isn't exactly clear, we can tell by the steady decline in their friendship that it is different for Nel, who wants to be viewed in a good light, which is what drove her to be friends with Sula to begin with – Nel as a character, as a human within the story, sets herself up for her own counterpointed characterization within the neighborhood of Bottom. There is a real friendship there, or the story itself would lack emotional depth, but once Sula begins to truly threaten Nel's position in

society, once someone “saw” this unspeakable act, her desire to be “better” begins to counteract with Sula’s desire for friendship and to be free.

Later, it is Sula’s differing desire that finally destroys their friendship. Nel has achieved her desire; she is married to her high school sweetheart, Jude, who has a respectable job, and they have two children. Sula has also been pursuing her own desires. She has been traveling for about ten years, going to school and giving her time and attention to any man she likes, regardless of his color or social status. Sula’s return to Bottom is where we see the counterpointed characterization, the difference between Sula’s desires and Nel’s, begin to clash again. Disregarding Nel’s desire to keep her perfect image, Sula sleeps with Nel’s husband, Jude. Jude leaves Nel, and her life is shattered. Nel cuts off her relationship with Sula, seeing her as the reason all her desires and dreams have been destroyed. Even when Sula is dying, there is still counterpointed characterization. Sula did not realize how much she would hurt Nel, who has been her only true friend throughout her life, and seeks forgiveness and reconciliation, but Nel’s desire is to have a positive appearance, and only half-heartedly forgives Sula, not because she has truly gotten over their conflict, but because she still desires to be the “good” one. It isn’t until long after Sula is dead that Nel realizes her own guilt and flaws in the final scene of the cemetery:

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl”  
(173)

Morrison uses counterpointed characterization between Sula and Nel throughout the novel, not only building on the reader’s expectations of female friendship, but on the

expectations of sisterhood, of marriage, of community, bringing together characters in all of these situations whose wants and needs differ in such a way as to generate conflict and progress the plot. Sula wants to be free, and Nel wants to exceed her place and society. Sula wants to sleep with Jude, and Nel does not want to be viewed as being part of a broken home. Even more than having different desires, however, it seems that, maybe below the surface, what Sula desires is what Nel doesn't allow herself to desire. This touches on what Baxter has to say about counterpointed characterization to create a shadow self:

My sense of counterpointed characterization is that it is generated from envy and lodges in the mind when we argue against ourselves. The contract of the shadow-self involves a secondary character who enacts what we have merely wished for, who is formed by the desire we have never done anything about. In the literature of the shadow-self, some characters throw off a shadow, and the shadow has to do with neediness. Someone wants to do something, but can't, so someone else does it for him. . . (94-95)

Nel, whose mother wants her to be able to pass for what is high society in their community, wants to instill in her appearance the virtues of whiteness, forces her daughter to sleep with a clothespin on her nose to change its shape and painfully straightens her daughter's hair with a hot comb, envies Sula's wild and unkempt childhood, the lack of parental control, Sula's very freedom that Nel tries to separate herself from. On the surface it seems that the counterpoint characterization comes from Nel and Sula's differing desires, Nel's wanting at least the illusion of status in society and Sula simply wanting her freedom. However, delving into Nel's resolution in the novel, that she actually missed Sula, and had been missing Sula since they were girls and

had first started drifting apart, suggests that the true counterpointed characterization here is Sula as Nel's shadow-self.

A few things Baxter has to say towards the end of his essay on counterpointed characterization bring Hoffman's *Faithful* to mind. The first is that "often in mainstream fiction two characters are set next to each other with the result that neither one wins or loses the moral contest. In some sense, in parallel counterpoint, there is *no* contest . . . characters are different from, rather than better than, each other" (95). The next is "One character tries to help (or get at) another character in order to make the mask fall for therapeutic or semi demonic reasons, to let the angels or furies loose" (96). *Faithful* is a book that has no antagonist, no one trying to hurt Shelby in any way, at least not directly. Most of the other characters in Shelby's life only want to help her get over her trauma and move on with her life, including a mysterious admirer who Shelby sees as her guardian angel.

In summary, *Faithful* is about Shelby Richmond, a high schooler who has been in a terrible car accident that leaves her best friend in an irreversible coma. Shelby spends the next several years overcoming her survivor's guilt and trauma, with the mostly unwanted and at times hindering help of other characters: Her mother, her first boyfriend, her coworkers, and eventually her secret guardian angel. This emotional novel is almost entirely driven by counterpointed characterization and Shelby's interactions with other characters within the novel, so I will focus on only one of the characters in which she has a counterpointed relationship with: Ben, Shelby's first boyfriend and the first person outside of her own family Shelby allows into her life after her best friend, Helene's, accident. Ben loves Shelby and desperately wants to help her get better, to make the "mask" of numbness she puts up "falls for therapeutic" reasons (Baxter 96). In many ways, he does. Ben provides Shelby first with illicit way to cope with her trauma such as

marijuana and alcohol, and then with stability and recovery when he brings her with him when he moves to New York. He and his family provide for Shelby; however Shelby cannot bring herself to love Ben. Even though they get robbed because “naturally, it’s Shelby who forgot to double-lock the door” the narrative goes on to say “Ben doesn’t blame her. He doesn’t raise his voice . . . he simply says, ‘Welcome to city living.’” (Hoffman 33). Just a few sentences later though, Shelby’s own inner-monologue displays the kind of tension their counterpointed characterization is creating within the novel: “Ben’s kindness only serves to reinforce Shelby’s notion that he’s all wrong for her. Before it’s even begun she knows she’s made a mistake” (33). The novel describes their differences, that “Ben is a romantic. He’s a sap,” and that “[Shelby] has an eye for tragedy and sorrow. Show her a rose and she’ll see only the wasp in the center of the bloom” (35). Despite this, however, they continue to stay together, as these two try to make it work, as Ben tries to fix Shelby, and as it all, inevitably, falls apart, because they are too different and they want different things. Ben encourages Shelby to get a job and go to school, even paying for it, and while Shelby does these things she does it in her own way and at her own pace, taking every opportunity to try and rebel against the person Ben wants her to become. She gets a job at a pet store, but brings home strays that Ben doesn’t want, dogs people view as broken and ugly. This is how Shelby sees herself and she is trying to show Ben that, in her mind, he is wrong for wanting her and that he can no more change her than they can fix one of the dog’s missing eyes. It is another example of Baxter’s “certain kinds of people are pushed together, people who bring out a crucial response to each other” (88). The novel suggests that Ben also knows that they aren’t meant to stay together, that they are too different, that he wants to fix Shelby to be the person he wants her to be, and not the person she wants to see. The counterpoint comes in that Shelby is the type of person to admit it and move on, and Ben is not.

We saw this previously as well, when Shelby asks her father why he doesn't just leave her mother and let Sue start a new life. Because his type of person, meaning people like him, doesn't do that, and Shelby's does (56). Eventually, Shelby and Ben's counterpointed characterization, that Ben is willing to keep trying to make the relationship work and Shelby is willing to move on so they can both be happy, results in their breakup:

It takes months to break up with Ben. He just doesn't take a hint. Shelby stays out late, she spends nights at Maravalle's, she stops talking to him for days on end, and he still doesn't get it. . . Shelby tells him it's over at the restaurant on the Upper West Side that his mother chose to celebrate his graduation (93)

Ben desperately wants to be the person who makes Shelby's mask fall, the counterpointed character who heals her, but the healed version he sees is not who Shelby wants to become (or feels worthy of becoming), and their different needs, beliefs, and desires create the rising action in the book and turns the novel in a different direction, developing and directing the plot, revealing what kind of person the main character is, what kind of person she thinks she can never become, and foreshadowing what is to come.

Counterpointed characterization is a driving force for the plot and creating tension in my thesis project *At the End of Magnolia Street*. Characters who bring out a crucial response in each other are often used in place of physical or external conflict. The main source of external conflict and rising action is a curse in which one member from each generation of either the Williams or the Allen family will die before the age of seventeen. Even this outside conflict contributes to the tension generated by counterpointed characterization. For example, Liberty Allen desperately wants to feel involved with her family, but feels like an outsider both because of being partially raised outside the family homestead and because of her empathetic abilities, causing her to often

feel overwhelmed by the emotions of those around her, resulting in her knowing how anyone around her is feeling despite whether they, or she, wants her to. Her mannerisms, lack of shared childhood history and family knowledge, and her abilities often alienate her from her extended family. Liberty's disbelief in the family curse also conflicts with her mother's anxiety for her children, and her own fear for her younger brother. Clairvoyant Noble Williams is counterpointed from her own twin sister, in that she has foreseen her own death as the victim of the curse and that there is no point in doing anything that she doesn't enjoy, or looking towards the future, while her sister Grace doesn't believe in the curse and does everything she can to succeed in school and life. Noble's parents and family, certain in their belief that it will be the Allens who will fulfill the curse this generation, disregard Noble's certainty that she will die and are frustrated with her lack of effort and thought towards the future. After the curse is fulfilled, both Liberty and Noble must overcome loss and guilt, struggling against family expectations to become their own people and find their own identities, the counterpointed characterization within their families continuing to generate the tension lost after the curse is fulfilled.

The use of counterpointed characterization is what makes these stories enjoyable and gives them their depth, evoking thought and emotional response within the reader. These novels, *Bastard out of Carolina*, *Sula*, and *Faithful*, elicited some kind of response in me as a reader, because of the relationships between the characters and the use of counterpointed characterization to create conflict and tension, to develop and progress the plot. Furthermore, Allison, Morrison, and Hoffman all use counterpointed characterization to do something amazing in their respective novels. Allison uses the counterpointed characterization between Bone, Glen, and Annie, to heighten the emotional depth and trauma of the narrative by having a child be abused and abandoned by people who should have her best interests at heart, who Bone

wants to care for and love her, but who can only care for and love themselves. Nel doesn't understand that she was never angry with Sula, but rather that she loved Sula and wanted to be more like her, until after Sula has passed away, and in losing her counterpointed shadow self has lost a piece of herself and perhaps her only opportunity for happiness again. Shelby is paired with various counterpointed characters, Ben, coworkers, lovers, friends, her own parents, throughout the novel to reveal what kind of person she thinks she is versus the actual person she is and the one she becomes, the mask she put up to survive her trauma falling away. It is through complex characters, characters with believable personalities, desires, and flaws as counterpointed characters placed together within these stories that makes them successful literary fiction, and makes their struggles, their wants, their failures, and their achievements, feel real and meaningful.



PART II

AT THE END OF MAGNOLIA STREET

By Katie Louise-Nicole Mitchell

## Chapter One

For as long as anyone could remember, the Williams had lived at one end of Magnolia Street, and the Allens had lived at the other. The two families had been feuding for generations, and though there was speculation amongst the town about why, only the Williams and the Allens knew. They crossed the street to avoid each other, they shopped at different stores, went fishing at different docks, and always set up at opposite ends of the farmer's market every Saturday. Even the principal of Rivershed's only school knew to put the Williams children and the Allen children in different classes, and to make sure they never shared homeroom. The Allen's house had stood for over a hundred years. Really there were several houses at the Allen's end of Magnolia Street so that sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents were usually never more than a shout out the backdoor away.

Unless you were two-year-old Liberty Allen, who lived with her Mamma and Daddy in Mount Pleasant, and you certainly couldn't have shouted from Michigan all the way to Tennessee, to a family you had never met.

Not Old Liberty Allen, mind you, but young Libby Winters, who was really an Allen on her mama's side. Libby's mama had left home when she was eighteen, had caught the first Greyhound bus she could the day after her birthday, and had met a man in Michigan. Nine months later, Libby was born.

Daddy proposed to Mama the day she found out she was pregnant, and they were married a month before Libby was born. There are photos of Mama in a t-shirt stretched tight over her pregnant belly and blue jeans, holding a bundle of wildflowers Daddy had picked for her from the side of the road. Her hair was lighter in that picture, the color of wet sand, but from as far back as Libby could remember, Mama's hair was as brown as dark chocolate.

All of the Allens were like that. They had pretty light hair when they were young, but as they got older it darkened out, though they all kept their honey eyes. Libby was no exception. She was born with a full head of hair, light as corn silk, but by the time she met any of the other Allens it had dulled to the same sandy color as her cousins.

Blended in with blurry glimpses of Michigan winters and trips to a cold, gray beach, one of Libby's clearest, earliest memories was sitting alone on the porch of the Allen's farmhouse in Rivershed, the white paint chipping and the screen door propped open, surrounded by a family of strangers. Faces that looked like hers, the same straight noses and round cheeks and small ears, peered into her own, the cousin from Mount Pleasant who was named after the family matriarch, great-grandmother, the cousin no one had met before, the one some of them didn't realize even existed because Mama never sent out Christmas cards or pictures and didn't call much. Libby was two – too young to remember, but she did anyway. Mama was in the house with great granny Liberty and the other adults, aunt and uncles Libby had never heard of before.

Mama had not been to Rivershed for almost three years, but when she got a call from great-granny asking her to come down for the Allen's family reunion so she could see her grandbaby and great grandbaby, Mama had looked hard at two-year-old Libby, had looked outside to where the rainstorm that had been lashing against the windows had suddenly stopped, and said she would see great-granny in two weeks.

The Allens always held their family reunions on August 1<sup>st</sup>, right before school started. They called them family reunions, but since most of the family saw each other at least every week anyway, there was usually very little reuniting. Those rare few Allens that did move away rarely came back, which was why everyone was surprised when Mama and Libby turned up that day.

August in Tennessee was brutal compared to Mount Pleasant's mild summers, and Libby felt hot and miserable in her new, itchy dress, baby blue and white plaid with a scratchy white collar. Granny Liberty had a thermometer with a clover nailed up next to the door, dusty and with an old, abandoned moth cocoon clinging to the side. The temperature read 92 degrees.

Libby sat on the porch in the shade, picking at the paint on the porch rails as she watched tanner versions of herself tear across the already dusty lawn, screaming and squealing, even the older cousins joining in on the fun, all of them having been banished from the house. The paint chips hurt the delicate skin under her nails, but she didn't stop. The laughter of the cousins carried and mingled with the laughter of the adults echoing from inside, mostly women, Mama and her aunts and great grandmothers and the wives of great uncles. Libby was in the middle, not a part of the laughter of the other children, excluded from the laughter of Mama and the other adults, an outsider from both. The men had filtered into the back yard where the grilling was being dutifully watched and cold beers nursed. In the middle of the front lawn was a stack of wood, gathered by the cousins and expertly arranged by the uncles, ready for the annual Allen bonfire after the sun went down. Those older boy cousins that had been trusted with pocket knives given to them by their fathers, given to them by grandfathers and great grandfathers, carried in the last great war and the last, last great war, striped limbs and honed them to a point much sharper than necessary for the huge Tupperware containers full of homemade marshmallows, carefully guarded in the kitchen.

Libby scratched her name into the paint on the side of a rail, where no one would see if they didn't know where to look. She'd forget about it until twelve years later, when she would be helping repaint the porch and find this evidence of a young vandal. She missed Mama. Even though she was really only a few rooms away, it felt like she was in another world all together.

Daddy had had to work, and hadn't come. For the first time in her life, Libby felt completely alone, despite being surrounded by family. It would not be the last time.

Cars and trucks had been driving up the bare gravel road all day, spitting up tornados of gray dust behind bald and bare tires. They had parked around Mama's green Chevy that Daddy had bought her, boxing them in, like when Libby laid branches around ants until they were forced to crawl over. The car that was pulling up Magnolia Street now was different. Libby couldn't say why; it wasn't the first beat up jeep to pull unto the long drive, though it was the first one that had door that were two different colors, neither matching the body. Libby felt something in her tighten with excitement, something right above her belly button. She couldn't see Mama, but Libby could sense that Mama had paused in the conversation, had stepped away from the others without explanation. Something was different about this car. Libby could feel her Mama's excitement, her hesitation, her fear, all tangled up like spaghetti, below her ribs but about her belly button, and other things, thing Libby felt but didn't understand, only that there was light and dark and excitement coming up the driveway. It was the first time Libby had felt what her Mama felt, the first time Libby realized that Mama had once been a child too, and must feel the same way about somebody as Libby felt about Mama, and someone must have sense when Mama was scared or lonely or hurting, the way Mama could always sense that about Libby.

Libby felt Mama take a step, and then another, felt her anxiety as Mama began rushing down the hall, her feet sticking to the wood floor because of the humidity, knew the exact moment she would run out the screen door and down the splintering wooden steps, stumbling on the sharp gravel of the driveway, her feet softened from years away from running barefoot through the country.

Libby moved to the edge of the porch, still avoiding the beating sun as she peered through the rails, watching as Mama stopped and as the jeep parked and as she waited, pulling at the edge of her shirt, patting her hand to her permed hair. A man and a woman climb out of the jeep, seemingly oblivious to Mama. They looked alike, both plump, both tan skinned and gray headed. The woman had a perm just like Mama, but her iron colored curls didn't suit her the way Mama's did. They both saw Mama at the same time, both paused, their eyebrows raised in unsure surprise.

"Hi Mama, hi Daddy," Mama said softly, twisting the hem of her shirt so tightly it would be forever stretched out of shape.

The man recovered first.

"Hey there, baby girl." His voice boomed with joyous laughter as he opened his arms wide and pulled Mama into a big bear hug. Libby saw that he was short, barely taller than Mama, but Mama melted into that hug like Libby had never seen before. The woman came around from the other side of the jeep, dabbing at her eyes stiffly and discretely. There was no room for her in the embrace, so she patted Mama's back and smiled awkwardly. Eventually their embrace broke and Mama gave the woman a hug as well, though her back stayed rigid and it was much briefer. The man pulled a stain handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his sweaty face with it, then, as though he had suddenly remembered something, looked around him, then up at the porch, at Liberty.

"Is that my grandbaby?" He asked so softly that Libby shouldn't have been able to hear, but Mama did, so she did too.

"That's her," Mama said proudly. "That's my Liberty."

The three came back to the porch and Mama scooped Libby up in her small arms.

“Liberty.” Mama never called her that, except when she was in trouble. “Liberty, this is your Granny and Granddaddy.”

Libby buried her face in Mama’s neck, smelling her Avon perfume and sweat, the fabric of her shirt rough against her cheek.

Mama laughed.

“She’s a little shy.”

“It’ll do her good, being here,” Granddaddy said.

“We’re only here for a few days,” Mama said, her voice changing, her body getting tense under Libby’s. Granddaddy and Granny nodded, but Libby could tell neither of them believed it. She turned her head and looked at Mama’s face and thought of how different she looked when she was here and how different her laugh sounded than when she was at the block party or when a neighbor came over for a cup of coffee, and Libby knew she didn’t believe Mama, either.

## Chapter Two

Two years later, on the other end of Magnolia Street, Noble Williams, age four, said her first words. Her mama, May Lynn, had called the town doctor out to the farm, and he diagnosed the little girl with having nothing good to say yet. Truth was, whenever there was something to be said, Noble's twin sister Grace usually, seven minutes Noble's senior, said it for the both of them. But sitting on the fence rail of one of their cattle pastures, Noble was watching her father with wide eyed intent and saw something no one else could see.

Grace was sitting next to her when Noble turned to their grandfather, who was standing next to them, and said, "Pop Pop, you should call the doctor for daddy."

Pop Pop, or Memphis to his friends, had married into the Williams family when he married Noble's grandmother, Constance, and was so startled to hear his mute granddaughter speak so clearly, he didn't see when his son was kicked in the chest by a startled cow. Justice Williams was lucky and only had a few bruised ribs, and while it hurt to laugh, he enjoyed retelling the tale of the first time his daughter spoke that night, after all the excitement had settled down and the farm chores finished. Nana didn't think it was funny.

"You could have died," she said, looking at an old photo that rested on the mantel.

"Mama," Justice said softly, "That was different. That was the curse."

Whenever someone mentioned the curse, the children were told to go out and play, even if it was already dark, fireflies lighting up the pastures and moths bouncing off the porch light. Despite this, Noble and Grace learned about it from their older brother, who had learned from older cousins so many times removed. The night their father got kicked by the cow, they stepped around cow paddies in one of the pastures lit by moonlight, the musky smell of cows, goats, and horses heavy in the thick summer air.



“Someone has to die,” Honor said, swatting a mosquito that landed on his forearm, leaving a small smear of blood. Noble and Grace looked at him wide eyed. At seven, Honor had three years’ experience on them. His word was law, final and unquestionable. The hum of crickets and cicadas was almost deafening.

“Why?” Grace asked.

“It’s the curse. We’re cursed because of the Allens.”

The girls were quiet, the sounds of insects and cows carrying over the acres of the ranch. They knew that the Allens lived at the other end of Magnolia Street, miles away, and had been told by Nan that they weren’t good people. They would go down the wrong aisles at the Piggly Wiggly to avoid them, and Nan had made Dad go to the school and change Honor’s classes so that he wouldn’t been in the same class as one of the Allens. They always unfolded their picnic blankets on different sides of the park for the annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July town picnic, and would set up their stall selling milk and cheese, wool blankets and sweaters, as far away from the Allens’ vegetable stall as they could at the weekly farmers’ market. Nan wouldn’t even acknowledge a customer if they came up to their table with a paper bag bearing the Allen Farms brand, so that Noble’s mama had to explain how good the Williams’ goat milk soap was for skin or how to hand wash one of Nan’s hand knitted sweaters.

Noble knew that the Allens were bad people, to be avoided at all costs, but she didn’t know why.

When Grace asked Honor, he just shrugged his shoulders and mumbled “just cause.”

“What’s the curse,” Noble asked, her unused voice small. A firefly danced in front of her, its green light almost unnaturally bright. She reached out and caught it carefully in her tiny first,

the rhythmic flashing lighting up under her small fingers. Her veins spider webbed beneath her tan skin, small tunnels of Williams blood.

“I told you, somebody’s got to die,” Honor said, “And it has to be a kid. One kid each generation,” he stumbled over the word, and while Noble didn’t understand completely, she remembered that daddy’s brother had died in an accident when he was a teenager, and that a great-aunt had fallen off a horse and died as a child. The Allens had lost people too, she knew. Nan was always saying it was their turn, they were next.

“Dad says it doesn’t work that way,” Honor said when Noble brought this up. “It’s one child from one of our families each generation. No one knows who. It could be either one of us. I could be me, or one of you two, or any one of the Allens. It’s up to fate.”

Their mama called them from the porch, threatening them with a switch if they didn’t come in and get washed up for bed right this minute. May Lynn was a stern mother, but she loved her children, and kissed each of them on the head tenderly as they stomped their boots off on the porch.

“I don’t believe in the curse,” Grace told her sister around her toothbrush at the sink they shared, “That’s for fairy tales. That’s kid stuff.”

Noble didn’t say anything as she spit into the sink. She’d had dreams about their uncle, who had gotten run over by the tractor, and their great-great aunt who had fallen off the horse. She’d had dreams about other people too, a dozen of them, on the Williams’ Ranch, and on what she thought the Allens’ farm might look like. They were different than any dream she had, just like when she saw Daddy would get hurt was different. She felt there, and she felt something dark and unstoppable. No matter what she did in her dreams, she could never stop the people from getting hurt. She could never warn her uncle about the tractor that would malfunction, or

her great-great aunt about the rabbit that would run in front of her horse and startle it. She got the same feeling whenever someone talked about the curse, that it was something very, very real, and something she could not stop, like when she felt herself trip and knew what the sting on her palms and knees would be, but could not stop it from happening. As she laid in her bed that night, the full moon shining through the window on the old scarred wood floor, listening to the sounds of her sister breathing in the bed against the opposite wall, Noble felt more sure than ever that there was a curse, and felt sad for the people who had died because of it, people that she had never met but had seen countless times, and wondered what it would have been like to have an uncle.

Noble took it for granted how unsurprised her family was of her visions. When she saw that one of the horses would kick a shoe during a ride, or that the thunderstorm that night would be much worse than forecast, not a single Williams would question it. The cousin who was a furrier and live two houses down would be called and the horseshoe fixed. All the animals would be doubly secured for the storm, the chicken coup full of clucking, anxious hens, and the cattle would be herded to their shelter to avoid the lighting strike that would hit the far pasture. They would try to irrigate the west pasture, which always turned into an ocean during heavy rains, but nothing ever worked and it would stay that way until the creeks began to run dry again.

In the winter Noble turned five, the family spent most evenings piled in the living room. Dad was watching the weather on TV. Pop Pop and Nan had gone to bed early. Mama sat on the couch, frowning at one of Nan's knitting patterns as she tried to finish a homemade Christmas sweater. Honor had gotten *Year in Sports 1998* from the book fair and was thumbing through it next to Mama. Grace set on the floor in front of Mama, tracing letters in a school workbook a

teacher aunt had given both the girls. Noble's was untouched somewhere in their room. Noble had the Williams family book in front of her.

Other families in Rivershed had family Bibles – ancient books with lists of births and deaths, pages pulling away from the spine, stains no one could explain. The Williamses had an old book too, with lists of births and deaths, but also family recipes and cures, salves and secrets, and the family history, for any Williams who cared to read it. Other families' books had a special place, and they sat there faithfully, on the mantel or the coffee table, or on top of the TV, day after day, seldom referenced, sometimes dusted. The Williams family book was always in the same place, too, and that place was exactly wherever it was needed. If May Lynn couldn't remember how much flour to use in great-great grandmother's yeast bread recipe (and, not being a Williams, but only married to one, that was forgivable) she could turn around and find the book on the counter, nestled between the eggs and the cheesecloth. She could wipe her hands on her patched apron and open the book and find exactly the page she needed, on the first try, though this was partially because the book just seemed to like her – some of the more troublesome cousins would sometimes have to try for as long as half an hour to find what they needed when they did their school papers on the family history or when they didn't want their mamas to find out they had been out in the poison ivy patch, the one they had been told to avoid, and now needed to know how much baking soda to mix with how much vinegar to making their burning, itching, splotches disappear before being noticed.

When Justice and Honor were restoring part of the old Williams farmhouse and, later, adding on additions, and Justice wanted to use the same kind of wood that had housed the family for generations, he found the book on a nearby sawhorse out on the porch, and opened it to records back from when the new house was built in the late 1800s, after the old house had been

burned down, and then when the house had been restored in the 30s, and again in the 60s, and found out to use oak wood when relaying the floors.

When Noble lay awake at night, drowning in a different kind of silence, one with house creaking and cricket chirpings and, somewhere in the house, the sound of adults murmuring or laughing, or the TV, she would turn on her side and find the book there, and would find that somehow the clouds had parted just enough to read by. Noble couldn't read very well yet, having not started kindergarten, but there were pictures in the book that told stories. That was the thing about the Williams' family magic – it wasn't for what you wanted, but for what you needed.

That night, Noble had found hand drawn sketches that a great uncle had done of some of the horses they'd had on the farm at the time, horses that had sired horses, which had sired the horses they had now. She looked up from the book, tracing her fingers over the beautiful markings of the paints, when the weatherman began forecasting for the weekend.

“And this front here will blow right over Middle Tennessee. It will be cold, but we will see very little precipitation,” he was saying.

“That's not right.” Noble looked out the window, where she could see snow falling that wasn't actually falling, almost knee deep on the Dad and Honor as they trudged out in gray morning light to feed and check on the animals. The vision faded, and it was dark outside, and Dad and Honor were in the living room with her.

“Gonna snow a lot honey?” Dad reached over for the old corded phone on the table beside his chair.

“Lots,” Noble confirmed, looking back down at the book. When she turned the page, it was a picture of horses with blankets draped over their backs, playing in snow.

Dad made a couple of calls that night, and the people he called made more calls. When the whole family piled into Pop Pop's '84 Dodge Caravan and went to the store, the Piggly Wiggly parking lot was packed.

"Couldn't have waited until we got our shopping done before telling the whole town, Justice?" Pop Pop asked Dad jokingly as he lifted Noble out of the third row seat.

"Sorry Pop," Dad smiled, taking Noble's hand, "You know I couldn't. That wouldn't have been right."

They went in the store together, past the Rivershed Peddler and corkboard tacked with ads for firewood and fence repairs, hunting dogs and babysitters. The ancient claw machine lit up and played a jingle as they passed it. Noble watched Pop Pop slide Honor a dollar with a wink, and smiled secretly when he saw that she caught him do it. He winked at her, too, and helped Nan get a cart. Noble raced Grace to be the one to ride at the front of Mama's cart, but Noble tripped and Grace won, laughing gleefully as she gripped either side of the buggy and Mama pushed, following behind Nan and Pop Pop. Noble held Dad's hand instead, following behind. Honor caught up with them a minute later, carrying a cheap stuffed bear.

Getting through the store was always a bit of a challenge, but word of the impending weather (despite the weatherman still insisting they wouldn't get a flake) had driven half the town out of their homes for bread and milk, and other essentials. They were stopped often, people asking how they were doing or thanking Dad for the call about the storm, or asking for farming advice. Some of the people in the store avoided Noble and her family, people who thought they were strange and didn't want to look them in the eye. Others turned right around, or turned down aisles that they didn't even need anything from. Sometimes Nan did this too, in

order to avoid an Allen or family of Allen's. She sneered each time she saw one, and outright glared at an elderly woman whose great niece was checking expiration dates on gallons of milk.

“Liberty Allen wouldn't know good milk if you poured it on her fool head,” Nan muttered loudly, not bothering to get any milk. They never bought milk, or eggs, or butter. Sometimes they made their own cheese, thought Pop Pop drew the line at mayonnaise, insisting store bought was better than any recipe the family tried. They usually made their own bread too, and with the bread aisle of the store nearly depleted, they loaded their buggy with flour and yeast instead. Dad and Pop Pop talked to a cousin who would drop off some fire wood, and Mama and Nana got a tub of butter, just to be safe, and bacon and ham, and a sack of potatoes.

Carts full, they went to the farthest checkout lane with the longest line to avoid the Allen's who were checked out in at the first cash register. More Williams, second or third cousins, got in line behind them, the adults chatting and laughing loudly. Grace helped unload the carts onto the checkout counter, and Honor loaded the groceries carefully into paper bags, the teddy bear he won tucked in among the potatoes. Noble lifted the bags and set them back in the cart, carefully not to undo her older brother's careful packing. In a lull as the cashier looked up how to ring up the head of garlic Nan had gotten, Noble looked at the old man carefully. She was startled to see him somewhere else, maybe at his home, coughing and clutching at his chest before falling down some stairs. He lay there, still and alone. Just like Noble's uncle had, and her great aunt.

The vision faded and Noble was watching the man scan canned cream of mushroom soup. She began crying and shakily, turning to her dad and grabbing at his sleeve desperately.

“What is it honey?” Justice asked.

“Something bad is going to happen to him,” Noble said, too loudly. The cashier stopped scanning. Dad looked at him nervously, then asked Noble, in a quiet, even voice, “What do you mean honey?”

“I saw him fall down the stairs,” Noble said, taking huge gasping breaths, barely able to talk around her tears, “He grabbed his chest and fell down the stairs.”

The cashier was terribly pale. He stopped scanning their groceries and looked at them, his jaw flexing as his teeth ground together. “Get her out of here,” he said, unmoving.

Dad picked Noble up and carried her outside. Honor followed, while everyone else stayed behind to hastily finish checking out in silence. While they waited, Dad sat Noble in the back seat of the Caravan, pulling a threadbare hand kerchief from his shirt pocket. Noble hiccupped as she tried to stop crying, letting her father wipe her face and hold the hand kerchief so she could blow her nose before wadding it up and stuffing it in his back pocket.

“Honey,” he said softly, crouching so he could look at Noble at eye level. Honor stood just behind him, looking at his sister seriously over their father’s shoulder. “You can’t say stuff like that to people outside the family, hear me?”

“I didn’t want to,” Noble waived, crying knowing she was in trouble all over again, “I didn’t want to see him fall. I don’t want that to happen to him.”

“I know baby,” Dad said, cupping Noble’s cheek, “I know, but you can’t tell them.”

“Why?” She hiccupped, shaking. She wished the heat was on. She wished they were on their way home. Pop Pop had the keys, and they were still inside. Honor shrugged off his coat and draped it over his sisters shoulders silently, his own skin pricking with goose bumps as the cold air touched his bare skin.



“People don’t like it. They don’t understand. What you can see, it scares them, because they can’t see it to, and because they aren’t ready to know.”

“I don’t want to know, either.”

“You’re a Williams, honey,” Dad said simply. “Sometimes that means seeing things you don’t want to see. Next time, you tell me or your mama if you see something, but don’t even tell anyone outside the family, ok?”

Noble nodded, grateful to see the rest of the family coming out. Dad went back inside as they loaded the back of the Caravan quietly. Noble climbed into her spot in the very back, watching over the back of the third row seat as the van was loaded. Honor dug around in each back before it was loaded until he found the teddy bear, handing it to Noble. She hugged it close. It smelled of dirt and potatoes, and made her want to be home. Grace climbed in beside her, looking at Noble’s tear-streaked face and the teddy bear, but she didn’t say anything. The others got in, and they sat quietly, waiting for Justice. He came out a few minutes later, his face stony. He slammed the door when he got in.

“He gonna go to the doctor and get his heart checked?” Pop Pop asked as he backed out slowly, keeping an eye out for other cars in the congested parking lot.

“No. He just told me to get out.”

Nan leaned forward and patted Dad’s arm, “You tried honey. That’s all you can do, is try.”

A week later, Dad and Pop Pop were both reading the newspaper when Noble came in for breakfast. She looked over their shoulder curiously and saw the cashier’s picture on the obituary page, but she was five, and didn’t know what that meant, and scared of the looks on the men’s faces, didn’t ask.

### Chapter Three

Libby didn't know how she felt about having a baby brother or sister, but she knew how her parents felt. More and more, she found herself knowing how other people felt. Not just Mama and Daddy, but the other students in Mrs. Brown's first grade class, her teachers and babysitter, the cab driver, the bank teller. It didn't happen all the time. Sometimes Libby would have days where everything felt quiet, days when she only knew what she felt. But other times, Libby felt overwhelmed with either joy or excitement that tasted sweet or spicy or tart, becoming so full of energy that she wasn't able to hold still or stop giggling and would get sent out into the hall to stare at the hand drawn pictures taped up out there or to her room where she would spin round and round with her eyes open, watching the room blur around her, until she was so dizzy she couldn't feel anything at all.

Other times she would feel so sad, or angry, or feel something horribly rotten that she couldn't understand at all. Those times, all she could do was bury her face in her hands or book or pillow, and weep, or throw her crayons against the wall, or kick the ball over the fence, so that a teacher would have to go fetch it and Libby would be banished to sit on a bench for the rest of recess. Her parents would sit her down after dinner and talk to her about her behavior, trying to be understanding while not understanding at all. They would ask her what she was feeling, and she would say she was worried, because that was how they felt, or she would be so tired she could feel nothing at all, and would ask to go to bed early without any TV time at all or even a story. She would bury her head under her pillow, and try to drown out not the words her parents murmured, but the feelings that whispered or screamed or oozed into Libby's head.

On her 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, Libby learned from Mama and Daddy about her soon to be baby brother. Their small house in the suburbs of Mount Pleasant, Michigan, had previously been full

of laughing children from Libby's class, running down the halls and through the lawn, kicking up red and brown maple leaves as they drifted down through the October air. Libby watched quietly, exhausted by the wild, untamed excitement surrounding her. Weeks before, when Mama had asked her who she had wanted to invite, Libby had made a list in green crayon. To be sure Mama got it right, she had drawn a picture beside each name. There had only been three names:

Great Granny Liberty

Granddaddy

Granny

Libby hadn't seen them since that first family reunion four years ago. They would call sometimes, or send cards or little presents. She wasn't sure if she missed them, exactly. How can you miss someone you'd only met once? But she was curious about them, and wanted to know them better. Mama had smiled tightly when she read the list and gave a little laugh, but Libby knew she was annoyed, and something else Libby didn't understand yet.

"Me and your Daddy will already be there. Let's invite your friends instead," Mama had said.

"I don't have any friends."

Libby had had lots friends in kindergarten. She'd made friends with anyone who sat next to her in reading circle, or who gave her a boost up to the monkey bars. When she'd started crying and throwing things, her friends hadn't wanted to play with her anymore. Libby didn't want to play with them, either. It was easier, less tiring, to stay away, to not tell Mama about invitations to parties or sleep overs that she would inevitably get sent home from because she couldn't handle the excitement of so many others, or the sadness and anxiety of another who desperately wanted to be in their own bed that night.

But no one cared if you broke all your crayons in a frustration that wasn't yours if there were cake and games involved, and if you had dog that played fetch and a tire swing in the front yard.

"Think of how much fun you'll have," Mama had said when she sent Libby to school with a gift bag full of handwritten Scooby Doo invitations. "You'll love it. You'll see." Libby had considered throwing the bag in the garbage, but she thought about the hot feeling of Mama's anger if she found out, how it would make Libby's face burn and her teeth mash together, and instead quietly handed the invitations out during reading hour, when most of her classmates were calmest. She knew Mama wouldn't invite her grandparents.

Almost all of her classmates came to the party, some with siblings, others with parents who stayed to mingle, so that Libby's house was overflowing with people and excitement.

"Go play." Mama had shooed her away when Libby tried to stay close to her "Be a good hostess. Look, everyone is playing hide and seek," then, turning to the other moms and laughing, quieter, "she's so clingy, she needs a sibling."

Mama put her hand on her own, now slightly round, belly. The other mothers clucked in agreement, and Libby wandered away from their contained bubble of enthusiasm. She went to where her father stood stoically at the grill, a cigarette balanced between his lips as he kept watch over thick, homemade burger patties with chunks of onions and peppers, and hotdogs with bits of cheese melting in the middle. Libby pressed against his leg quietly, and he patted her head with his big carpenter's hand without looking down at her or saying anything. A few other dads stood nearby, nursing cans in cozies and talking football and job markets. Daddy didn't say much, and his emotions were quietest, though Libby could feel his tiredness and under that, an ever present worry.

“You should go play,” Daddy said after a bit, but when Libby didn’t say anything, he handed her a hotdog instead.

Eventually Mama noticed Libby was missing from the other kids and tracked her down. She was sitting carefully in Mama’s flowerbed, making houses from leaves and twigs among the mums for bugs, leading ants there with crumbs from a hotdog bun. Libby like ants, and moths and rollie pollies, creatures so small and simple that if they did have feelings, they didn’t share them with Libby.

Mama had been more excited about the party than anyone, or maybe she had been the only one excited about it at all. She helped Libby up and dusted the dirt and leaves off her dress. It was time for games. She had it all. Name bingo, musical chairs. Daddy had even made corn hole boards and Mama had painted Scooby on one and Shaggy on the other, and found purple and green bean bags to match. She had also gotten a poster board and painted the Mystery Machine on it with an empty window, and made cut outs of all the characters, her own version of pin the tail on the donkey.

“Line up everybody,” she said, calling them all together. “Pick your favorite character.”

As the birthday girl, Libby was the only one with Scooby. Mama produced a purple handkerchief and, sweeping Libby’s hair off her eyes, tied it around her eyes, blocking out the light and the gap toothed smiles around her. Gently, Mama’s hands spun Libby round and round, the leaves crunching under foot, the grass soft. Libby felt her shoelace catch and come undone. She bumped into Mama’s protruding belly. She felt other, smaller, harder hands join in the spinning. She felt the world go round and round, smelled the damp and decay of the leaves and the charcoal smoke of the grill, heard the laughter of her classmates, felt their hands, felt more than that, something that was not physical but just as tangent and more powerful, and she saw

nothing. The spinning stopped, and Libby stumbled. She felt adult's hands, Mama's hands, steady her, and turn her in the right direction. She was clinging to her Scooby cutout, felt the paper crumpling in her hands, the double-sided tape clinging to her fingers. She felt the excitement of so many people pressing down on her, settling in her back and her chest and her stomach. Her heart was pounding, and she couldn't breathe.

Was she having a heart attack? Daddy's daddy had died of a heart attack. Daddy had held Libby tight at the funeral, held her up so she could see his gray face and say goodbye. Had he felt like she did now, before he died?

The emotions pressed in on her more, and there was a roaring in her ears, and Libby couldn't tell if the sound was her classmates shouting, or her heart attacking her. She dropped Scooby and pressed her hands to her ears, trying to drown out the noise, then tore at the handkerchief, desperate to see what was happening. Mama had tied it too tight. It wasn't coming off. It would never come off. She would be blind and hear the roar and feel her chest get tighter until her heart attack killed her. Libby screamed.

She felt Mama's thin fingers yanking at the knot. She pulled the handkerchief off, the purple fabric now darkened with tears and sweat.

"Liberty Allen Winters." Mama's eyes were wide. She was glancing between Libby and the other children, who had grown quiet, and the other mothers, who were watching them and murmuring. Libby felt Mama's worry, and she felt her embarrassment, and, stinging, biting, like a pepper seed that's gotten caught between your teeth and pushed out on your tongue hours later, a twinge of anger. Libby's face was hot and wet, her hair pushed up. Tears and snot dripped from her chin and nose. Mama picked Libby up, and, exhausted and scared, Libby buried her face on her shoulder, and cried in earnest, her little body shaking violently.

“Shush,” Mama said, then loud enough for everyone to hear. “Just tired. Let’s go rest.”

Mama turned and carried Libby into the house. Over her shoulder, Libby saw Mrs. March, her babysitter, step forward and take over the games before she was carried into the house. With each step Mama took, the emotions of the other children faded, and Libby grew more tired.

Mama sat Libby gently on the couch and went into the kitchen. Sadie, their yellow lab, had followed them inside and licked Libby’s hot, salty cheeks. Sadie was calm, and warm. Water was running in the kitchen. Libby raised her hand tiredly and rubbed Sadie’s velvety ears, and the dog’s tail thumped on the carpet. Mama came back with a damp washcloth, and Sadie rested her big blond head in Libby’s lap as Mama wiped her face with cool, gentle strokes.

“What’s wrong with you, girl,” Mama asked softly, her southern accent bleeding through. It did sometimes, when no one was around, or Mama was particularly worried, or angry. She was worried now. Libby felt it, like everything inside her was knotted, and the knots were tightening. Libby gagged, and tasted the hot dog she had eaten earlier.

The phone rang, making both of them jump. Mama snatched it off the receiver.

“Winter’s residence,” she said sharply, cradling the phone on her shoulder as she folded the washcloth and laid it across the back of Libby’s neck. The look on her face changed, tightened, resigned. She sat on the couch and answered questions shortly. Libby laid down, letting Sadie’s head droop on the couch so she could lay her own in Mama’s lap. She was so tired. She could barely feel what Mama felt anymore, only that it was less. She didn’t know what she felt at all. She was just tired.

“Maybe,” mama said, “Let me see if she’s feeling up to it. It’s been a big day. Libby Allen.” Libby looked up. Mama almost never called her just Libby Allen. Only when she was

feeling homesick, not for this home but another one. Libby looked up, the now warm and itchy washcloth falling off her neck onto the couch.

“Someone wants to speak with you.”

Libby took the phone, yellowed with age and cigarette smoke. She didn’t want to talk on the phone. She didn’t want to talk to anyone. She wondered if she could just sit there, holding the phone away from her forever or until whoever it was hung up. No one ever called for her, except Daddy when he went on trips, or rarely Granny or Granddaddy would call. A shadow of curiosity, all her own, pulled the phone up to Libby’s ear.

“Hello?” she said in a cracked voice that had clearly been crying.

“Happy birthday, Liberty Allen.” An old woman’s amused voice crackled over the receiver. Libby smiled. Mama got up, and Libby laid back down on the couch, pressing her free ear into the cushion, pressing the hard plastic of the phone into the other so hard that it hurt, so that her great grandmother’s voice filled her head. Sadie nuzzled her big, soft head closer. Libby stared straight ahead, at the sunlight filtering through a crystal ashtray. She didn’t want to close her eyes.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Libby said. Everyone always called great grandmother ma’am.

“Six years old. You’re getting to be a big girl now.”

Libby didn’t say anything. She didn’t know what to say, except that she didn’t feel like a big girl, but it was wrong to disagree with adults, so she just nodded, the couch cushion scratchy against her cheek. Great grandmother of course couldn’t see her, but seemed to understand anyway.

“Being a big girl can be hard, sometimes. Especially being a big girl who is also an Allen.”



Libby still didn't say anything. Despite the couch cushion and the phone, she heard Mama in the kitchen, straightening up, keeping busy. A group of children ran past the living room window, their shadows dashing across the walls. Libby started to cry again, tears leaking down her cheeks and onto the couch. Sadie licked her face wetly.

"You see, Allen's are special. I'll bet your special, too."

"But I'm a Winters," Libby said, feeling particularly unspecial.

"You can be both," great grandmother said simply. "Maybe being both makes you even more special. Makes you stronger. You're going to need to be strong, Liberty Allen Winters."

"Why?" Liberty heard her mother titter in the other room. She had taught Libby never to question adults, and it had taken a long time to break the habit.

"Well, Allen's are special – we have gifts, and sometimes those gifts can seem like a real burden. I bet you've started feeling things that are different, maybe things you don't want to. I did too, when I was your age."

Liberty was quiet. She could hear her own breathing, and sniffled, her nose still running.

"Just remember, Allen women are strong. You have to be strong baby girl. Even when the weight seems too heavy to carry. Your gifts may seem like a curse sometimes, but that isn't the curse, not the real one. Hear me?"

"Yes ma'am," Libby said, not understanding her great grandmother but knowing she was expected to respond. She knew something about curses, she thought. Snow White had maybe been cursed, and Ariel. Scooby and Shaggy were scared of cursed things, and ran away.

"I should let you get back to your party," Great grandmother Liberty said, sounding more like herself. "Happy birthday Liberty Allen Winters. I love you."

“I love you too,” Libby said, thinking she would rather run away than go back to the party. The phone beeped, and she laid it down on the couch beside her.

“Do you want to go back out to your party?” Mama asked. Libby shook her head, and Mama sighed.

“Me either,” she said, and Libby knew she meant it. But Mama had to, so she told Libby to rest and went back outside, carrying a cake without any lit candles. Exhausted, Libby stumbled to her bedroom and collapsed on the new Barbie comforter Granny and Granddaddy had sent her. Sadie followed her, climbing onto the bed and stretching out next to the little girl, the warmth from her body and calmness radiating. There was a box in the corner too, with a picture of a cradle on it, but Mama had told her that that gift wasn’t for her. Libby didn’t mind closing her eyes now, not after talking to great grandmother and with Sadie lying next to her. She could still hear the other children outside, but she buried her face Sadie’s neck listened to the dogs even breathing. She quickly fell asleep, exhausted and feeling nothing, afternoon sunlight streaming through pink curtains.

Libby woke up to a blissfully quiet house. She could hear Mama in the kitchen, and an announcer calling plays on the TV, but nothing else. Everyone else was gone. It was dark outside. Libby couldn’t see any stars. The streetlights outside were too bright. She went and sat on the couch with Daddy, and Mama came in and kissed her on the head, handing her a glass of water and sitting next to her. No one said anything about the party. Mama took an envelope off the coffee table and handed it to Libby. There was a pile of presents under the TV, but Libby was too tired to be excited about them. The envelope was heavy, and had her name written on it in Mama’s big, loopy handwriting. She could barely read it; she hadn’t learned cursive yet. She opened it and pulled out the card. On it, there was a picture of Scooby and Shaggy, and it read

“Happy 6<sup>th</sup> Birthday!” Libby opened it up and struggled to read Mama’s scrawled message within, with a grainy black and white photo of something liney and lumpy. If Libby squinted and turned the picture, she could see an odd shape.

“Happy 6<sup>th</sup> birthday,” Mama read aloud. “You’re going to be a great big sister! Love, your future little brother or sister, Mama, and Daddy.”

Even as tired as she still felt, she could tell Mama and Daddy were excited, and a little worried. And something else. Libby looked at her Mama’s face, at her smile, at her tired, brown eyes. Mama was afraid, and Libby didn’t know from what. All she knew was that adults weren’t supposed to be afraid of anything, and for Mama to be scared, meant there had to be something terrible.

## Chapter Four

All the windows in the house were thrown open, the curtains dancing lazily in the breeze, trying to let the stifling, confection smelling hot air out of the house. It was the middle of June, and it didn't help much. Noble's face was red, her tiny eight year old self wilting from the heat. Grace's face, usually a mirror of Noble's own, was just as red, but had a cheery smile on her face as she helped Mama mix another batch of cookies. Noble stood in the corner, having started a flour fight that neither her sister nor her mother found amusing. The floor was now powdery and slick, and Noble would have to clean up the kitchen by herself. Sweat formed along her hairline, and she itched.

"My feet hurt," Noble said, tired of standing, twisting the hem of her shirt tightly, stretching it.

"Hush." Mama wiped her forehead on her shoulder as she mixed the cookie dough, the ceiling fan causing her wispy hair to dance around. Nan had been helping, but the kitchen had gotten so hot she had gone upstairs to lay down in her bedroom, the only room in the house with a window AC unit. Dad had asked Mama if she had wanted a unit for the kitchen, but she had complained it would ruin the window view. Noble wondered if she regretted the decision as heat radiated off from the oven.

"Who has a bake sale in the middle of the summer?" Noble leaned against the fridge, sliding a magnet around and around so that it clacked across the service.

"Stand up straight and stop playing with that," Mama said, not looking up. Her face and neck were red. She dampened a washcloth with cold water from the sink and laid it across her neck before beginning to spoon cookies dough onto a baking sheet.

Noble knew what the bake sale was for. Grace had been going to the library all summer, checking out armloads of books and staying up in Nan's room to read to her. Nan hadn't been feeling well, and was resting more. Grace had stayed inside so much instead of coming out to play with Noble, that while everything else looked the same, Noble's skin had tanned to a much darker shade than her twin's. Grace's skin looked light and pure as the flower, while Noble's was the shade of the chocolate chip cookie dough, and covered in freckles. Honor had been too busy, too, practicing football with their cousins so he could try out for the junior team when school started. Noble, trying to find something to do, would usually get underfoot and be sent outside to play. Mama had said she'd spent more time angry with Noble than doing anything else that summer.

"Can I be done yet?" Noble said, dragging the words out.

"Noble Williams you're going to get a switchin if you don't stop fussin," Mama warned, "Hand me the eggs so we can start on the brownies, and then go out and play. I don't want you back in the house till dinner."

Noble bounced in excitement as she got the last carton of eggs from the fridge. The container, which had been reused for years, generations of their family chickens supplying eggs for it, was bent and unstable. As Noble carried it across the kitchen, the worn out cardboard gave way, becoming unbalanced in Noble's hand, and fell to the wooden floor. The shells scattered and yolk splattered all across the floor.

"Noble Williams." Mama slammed her hands down on the counter.

"I'm sorry!" Noble said, tears already beginning to gather. "Mama, I'm so sorry."

"Those were the last of the eggs. We gave the rest to your cousins this morning."

“I’ll go check the chickens,” Noble said, readying to get out of the house and away from her mother’s anger, something she had been having to do more and more often.

“Those chickens haven’t laid a dozen eggs since this morning, Noble.” Mama stomped around the mess in the floor on the way to the door, grabbing Noble’s arm roughly. “Come on. Just go outside. Stay out of the kitchen.”

Noble followed Mama as she banged open the back screen door, out onto the porch. Dad was up on the hill, just going into the barn, one of the stray barn cats riding on her shoulder. Mama called his name loudly, starting the chickens and the goats closest to the house, her voice carrying across the farmyard.

Dad turned and raised his hand in hesitant recognition. Everyone knew that tone of Mama’s, and to be wary when you heard it.

“Run to the store and get some eggs for Gracie’s bake sale.” She looked at Noble, leaning dejectedly on the porch rail, “Get two dozen, just to be safe.”

“Haven’t bought eggs from the store in years,” Dad said, fishing his truck keys out of his pocket. “How many cookies you makin in there, M’Lynn?”

Mama was already back inside before Daddy had responded. Through the screen door, Noble could see that Grace had already started cleaning up her sister’s mess. She wondered how many times her sister had had to do that. She wondered how often her sister wished she didn’t have a sister at all.

“Trouble in the kitchen?” Daddy asked Noble as he approached, readjusting his ball cap, Williams Ranch embroidered above the bill.

“I dropped the eggs.” Noble flicked dirt off the rail of the porch.

“Why don’t you come with me to the store? Get out of here for a bit.”

Noble nodded, clomping down the porch stairs and trailing after Dad. She didn't go to the store often, but she was ready to get away from her Mama and sister for a while. Dad opened the old heavy truck door for her. She climbed in and buckled her seat belt as he slammed the door behind her and walked around to the other side. The truck jumped to life with a rumble as he turned the key in the ignition and shifted into gear.

Dad chatted about the animals for a few miles, but grew quiet at Noble's silence. She stared out the window, fiddling mindlessly with the vinyl seat belt that slid too far up her short body, watching cousins and aunts and uncles houses pass as they made their way down the first few miles of Magnolia Street, then the houses of classmates and strangers as they turned onto the highway on their way to the store, and the river as she crossed the Rivershed bridge.

"Listen honey," Dad said as they pulled into the Piggly Wiggly parking lot, pulling the brake into place and cutting the ignition. "We all make mistakes. Even me. Even your mama. We make mistakes every day. There's nothing wrong with making mistakes. It's part of growing up, part of being human. It's when you let those mistakes get you down and you don't get back up that you're doing wrong. So come on, let's get back up, and go get your mama some eggs. When we get home we'll go check on them new goats and see how they're doin'."

Noble nodded and followed her father into the store. Just the trip to the back of the store took twice as long as it should have. Half the people went out of their way to avoid the father and daughter, the other half went out of their way to casually bump into them and strike up a conversation. Noble saw the old Allen woman in the meat section, her critical eye examining two cuts of beef. There was a girl with her Noble had never seen before, but who had the same eyes and features as the old woman. The old Allen woman caught Noble staring and bent down to whisper into the girl's ear and point at Noble. The girl turned to look at Noble as the old woman

whispered, but her face was exhausted looking, and there was no change or sign of recognition there. Noble felt a tickle, like when she felt like she had to sneeze but couldn't quite, like she was on the verge of a vision, but Daddy's booming laugh startled her as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and steered her away from the neighbors he had been chatting with, saying a polite goodbye.

"Let's get those eggs and get out of here, or we'll be here all day," he said quietly so only she could hear, "You're mama will hunt us down if we don't get back.

The cool air from the egg cooler was welcome after being out in the summer heat. Dad opened the eggs up and checked them to make sure they weren't cracked. The stark whiteness of them startled Noble, who was used to the brown speckled eggs of their family chickens. He handed a carton to Noble, who took them reluctantly.

"What are the chances of dropping two in one day?" He checked another carton and carried it himself.

They checked out, Dad joking with the middle aged check out woman he'd went to school with and the young bag boy who was the son of a childhood friend. Noble didn't say anything, picking at a scab on the back on her hand, hoping the distraction would keep any visions at bay. She didn't know when they would come. Sometimes she would go weeks without one, and then she'd have several small ones in a few days. Big ones exhausted her, like when she saw that a neighbor's old barn would burn down. Dad had gone over to their house to visit, and tried to nonchalantly mention how dry it had been and how old the barn had been. It hadn't worked, and the barn had burned down anyway.

Sometimes Noble's visions didn't come true. She had seen Honor breaking his arm while playing with cousins. She told her brother about this vision, and he had stayed home and played



with her that day instead. He'd still managed to sprain his ankle in a goffer hole, but it healed \ faster than a broken arm would.

At last, Noble and her father carried the eggs out to the parking lot with many a friendly wave and nod, and finally made their way back to the safety of the truck cab. Daddy gave a relieved sigh as he started the truck and pulled out of the Piggly Wiggly parking lot, talking about all the people they'd bumped into in the store until they turned onto Magnolia Street. Daddy pulled off the road and stopped.

"Why don't you drive us home," he said, his voice low and conspiring. "Don't tell anyone. You steer, and I'll work the shift and the pedals."

Noble's heart hammered with excitement and fear as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"What if we get caught?" she asked.

"It's fine. Pop Pop let me and your uncle drive on his lap when I was your age."

Noble climbed over, sitting on her father's lap like she used to when she was younger, her head coming up to just below his chin.

"Easy does it," he said as she grasped the steering wheel. He worked the gas and the clutch, shifting from first into second as the countryside began to meander by. "It's not like on TV where the steering wheel is always rocking and rolling this way and that. Just steer us nice and smooth."

Noble's heart ratcheted in her chest as another truck came up behind them, but the other truck passed them and gave a friendly wave. Dad waved back, but Noble kept both hands on the steering wheel.

"You're doing great honey," Justice said, letting the truck amble down the road at thirty miles, but for Noble it felt like a hundred.

Another car crested the hill ahead coming the opposite direction, driving fast. Dad shifted, ready to grab the wheel, but otherwise didn't say anything. He kept the speed steady as Noble took the gentle curve.

The other car came around the same curve too fast and veered into their lane. Dad shouted and grabbed the wheel, yanking it from Noble's hands and steering them out of the way, off the road and onto the bumpy shoulder. Noble gave a panicked gasp as her vision fogged over, the real world in front of her replaced with something else.

She saw herself in the truck, this truck, looking out the front window as it swerved off the city bridge, the one that crossed the river that split the town in half. The bridge they had crossed to get to the store and back again. The bridge that she crossed to go to school. She was older, taller, her hair longer. The truck was swerving in the fog, off the bridge, and plunging down, to the river. Everything was cold, and then dark.

They jolted to a halt.

"What is that idiot doing?" Dad stared in the rearview mirror as the other car kept driving, seemingly unaware that they'd run someone off the road. "Are you ok honey?"

Noble trembled. She didn't tell her dad she had just seen her own death. That she'd seen the curse in action, that it would take her, just like it had taken her uncle, that their family wasn't safe, had never been safe, would never be safe. She nodded, her skin chill and covered in goosebumps. Justice lifted her into the passenger seat and looked her over, mistaking her silence for shock from the near accident.

"I'm sorry honey, I know that was scary. We're ok though. You're ok. That's just something you gotta watch out for when you're driving. No matter how good a driver you are, there's always someone in too big a hurry."

Noble felt blank and drained. She nodded, but didn't say anything, not on the drive home or when they delivered the eggs. Mama was in a good mood again, and the hot kitchen was bursting with the smell of cookies and brownies and every sweet family secret recipe imaginable,. The family book was propped on the counter, the only thing in the kitchen not covered in flour or dough. Noble followed Dad to check on the goats, and the cows and the sheep and all the animals as he made his daily rounds and made sure everyone was cared for and the farmhands were doing their jobs. She couldn't shake the vision of the foggy river.

That night Noble pushed her food around at dinner without eating it. If anyone noticed anything was wrong, no one said anything. Dad retold the story of the driver who took the curve too fast, omitting that Noble had been steering. Grace and Mama talked excitedly with Nan about the bake sale the following day and how much money they would raise for the library, what kind of books they would check out when they got there. Honor was excited about going camping that weekend with Dad and Pop Pop. Noble wanted to ask about the curse, but everyone was so happy, and there was never an opportunity. All their words fell on Noble, burying her deeper and deeper. She went to bed weighed down, not having said a word, and no one having noticed.

Noble picked at a loose thread on her quilted pillow, the blanket, unneeded in the summer heat, kicked to the bottom of the bed. The ceiling fan hummed, almost drowning out her sister's restful breathing. Maybe this was why the curse had chosen her. This was why she would die, driving off the Rivershed bridge. Because no one would miss her when she was gone. She was the youngest twin, the unplanned one, the spare. All that talk about not worrying about the curse was because no one was really worried about it. Not because it would be the Allen's that would lose someone, but because they had the person for the job, and it wouldn't even be that much of an inconvenience to lose her.

Lying in bed that night, Noble watched her sister sleep. Grace had done away with most of her toys, and had begged for a desk until Dad and Pop Pop had made her one. She would sit there and do spelling workbooks and math equations, even in the summer. There was a pile of books there, waiting to be returned to the library the next day before the bake sale started. Noble's side of the room was still home to Barbies and Legos, and while Grace would still play with her, she was sure to tell everyone it was kid stuff. Grace had even gotten rid of all her stuffed animals, and slept sprawled out, alone, while Noble held the teddy bear Honor had given her tight. Was this why the curse had chosen her? Because her sister was better than she was?

She wished the book was handy. She wished she could look up the curse, and how to break it. She had tried before, but the book would never show her. Now it wouldn't even appear for her. She'd looked for it after dinner, something she had never had to do. It would usually be sitting nearby, within reach. Tonight, it was nowhere to be found, and when Mama had asked what she was looking for, Noble had been afraid to tell her the book wouldn't appear for her. She'd ask Grace to ask her to help, but Grace had only shrugged and said someone else was probably using it. Noble thought the book probably knew she was cursed, too, and not worth appearing for. She waited all night, hoping it would change its mind, but it didn't appear, and when Noble finally fell asleep, she dreamed of bridges, and water, and not being able to breathe.

## Chapter Five

Libby hid under a pile of stuff animals in the corner of her room, trying hard not to breathe. Closest to her was a bunny Great-grandmother had crocheted for her when Libby had visited that summer. Now it was November, and Liberty Allen Winters was nine, and she did not want to go to school.

She heard Mama in the kitchen, taking care of Ward. Everyone talked about how well behaved Ward was. Mama liked to say that both her children were well-behaved, because Libby didn't throw things anymore, and she didn't get sent out in the hall or to detention as often.

Her gift hadn't gone away. Libby could still sometimes feel what other people were feeling. She still struggled to tell at times what she felt, or sometimes she was so tired she felt nothing at all. She had just gotten used to it, like getting used to a painful blister. It was still there, it still ached, but not as much as other things.

Ward *was* well behaved, Libby thought, feeling hot under the mountain of stuffed animals. He was a quiet baby, and rarely cried or pulled hair. Mama joked that if she was lucky her would skip his terrible twos, and at thirty months old, it seemed likely he would. He was polite, and kept his emotions to himself. Libby didn't know how he did it. She knew he must feel things, because he did cry, and laugh and make faces. She knew she could feel what babies felt, because Mrs. March would sometimes bring her baby over when she babysat, and little Elizabeth was colicky and often unhappy. Ward, like Sadie, was just there, and Libby loved him even more for it.

Great grandmother Liberty had been delighted to meet Ward. She had been thin when they visited, her skin almost translucent. Libby thought she could see her great grandmother's actual knuckle bones through her skin. She couldn't see very well anymore, so that one of

Libby's older cousins had to drive her to the store, and Libby had helped her read the expiration dates on the milk and checked the eggs for cracks like Mama had taught her. They had scrambled eggs together and fed the soft bites to Ward.

"He's special too, you know," Great grandmother had said as she wiped eggs off Ward's face. "Like you. I think you too will be good together."

"Special how?" Libby had asked, looking hard at her little brother.

Great grandmother had shook her head, "Too soon to tell, but it will be good. You two are strong. Strong enough to survive the curse."

Libby had learned about the curse that summer, too. Her cousins played a game in the woods, running through the fallen trees and empty creek beds. One person was the curse, and that person chased the others as fast and as hard as they could. Whoever they caught, would "die." They were out, and the game started all over again. Libby was always one of the first ones out. She asked an older cousin who refused to play what the curse was, but she wasn't sure she believed it. It seemed silly to think that she or Ward or any of the younger cousins would be killed because of a curse, one that no one knew how it started, other than it was the Williams' fault, and no one knew how to break, which was also the Williams' fault, because they had the answer in a magic book, and didn't know how to find it.

She had looked at the calm, cherub face of her little brother and couldn't imagine a world where anything could happen to him. She'd tried to imagine how he could die, and couldn't. At the time, she thought that her parents would protect them, that parents would never let anything bad ever happen to their children, would always keep them safe. Now she wasn't sure if that was true, anymore. Not now that she sat next to Jane.

Libby hears Mama's footsteps coming down the hall and holds her breath, trying her best not to move. Her door opens, and Mama sighs.

"This again? It's getting old, Liberty Winters."

Libby heard Mama moving around the room, and imagined her looking under the bed and in the closet. She hoped she won't think of the stuffed animals, that it was clever enough, that she wouldn't have to go to school.

Mama moved some of the stuff animals and Libby took a fresh breath.

"Come on, it's time to go."

Mama didn't ask why Libby didn't want to go to school anymore. She'd tried everything, but Libby didn't know how to tell her. She didn't even know what to tell her. Daddy tried, too. That was even worse.

Libby had become scared of Daddy. He hadn't done anything. It wasn't his fault, and Libby felt bad. She knew it hurt his feelings. She didn't help him with the outside chores anymore, or watch TV with him. There had been a "take your daughter to work" day a few weeks ago, and when Daddy asked Libby to go with him, she could feel how excited he was. But the fear she carried around choked her, and she said no, and then excused herself and cried, because she could feel how much she had hurt him. That the fear was not hers, somehow made it that much worse.

The drive to school was the same as it always was. Ward babbled in his car seat next to Libby. He reached towards her, and she gave him her finger. He gripped it with his tiny hand and laughed, and Libby leaned over and kissed his little, sticky fist.

When they got to school, instead of dropping Libby off in the carpool lane, Mama parked, turning off the ignition and unbuckling her seatbelt.

“What are you doing?” Libby asked, feeling her mother’s anxiety and determination.

“I just need to talk to your teacher,” Mama said, getting Ward’s carrier. “Don’t worry. You’re not in trouble.”

Libby didn’t know if she believed her or not. She didn’t feel like Mama was angry, but why did she need to talk to her teacher?

When they got to Libby’s classroom, Mama kissed the top of her head. “Go sit down. I’ll see you this afternoon.” Libby kissed Ward on his smiling cheek and did as she was told. Her fourth grade classroom was arranged so that there were a dozen small tables facing the front of the classroom. Each table sat two students, and they had assigned seating. Libby’s tablemate wasn’t there yet. Jane was usually late, and just like every day, Libby struggled with hoping she would be there and wishing she wouldn’t.

Mama had already talked to Libby’s teacher and left when Jane came in, just as the bell was ringing. She was wearing long sleeves and pants, even though the weather was still warm. Jane didn’t smile when she sat down, and Libby could tell the night before had been bad. Jane never talked about it, but Libby had seen bruises on her before, and the waves of fear, unhappiness, and anger that rolled off Jane were overwhelming. Libby had a hard time concentrating that morning, and was grateful when the bell rang for lunch. If she was lucky, she could arrange it so that they wouldn’t be able to sit together.

Libby wasn’t lucky. The other kids at the table scooted down to make room for Jane when she came over, and she sat down next to Libby, who felt so sick with dread and melancholy that she couldn’t eat. Jane didn’t eat much, either, though she was thin. Her hair was long, and she pulled a strand into her mouth and chewed on it, staring at the wall. There were dark circles under her eyes. Libby wished Mama hadn’t found her this morning.



Libby thought she would get a break at recess, where she could be lost in a sea of hundreds of other children, but when the bell rang the teacher asked her to stay behind. Jane hesitated and looked back at her, but had no choice to leave by herself.

“Libby, please go to Mr. Pierce’s office. When you’re done, you may go to recess,” the teacher said.

Libby was confused as she walked to Mr. Pierce’s office. Mr. Pierce was the school’s guidance counselor. Mostly, he just went around to the classrooms, talking to them about bullying and being careful of strangers. Libby didn’t know of anyone who actually went to his office.

She knocked on the solid door, and Mr. Pierce opened it for her.

“Hello, Libby.” He had a deep voice, and a big smile, and a balding white head. On a normal day, Libby liked Mr. Pierce, but Jane was afraid, and Libby had been called to his office, and she was tired and worried. But at least this was a break from Jane.

“Sit down,” Mr. Pierce said, closing the door. His office was small and didn’t have any windows, but was full of light, bright colors, and white shelves full of books and VHS tapes about getting along and talking to adults. On the desk was a picture of Mr. Pierce with his grandchildren, a notebook with a pen, and blank paper with crayons. In a jar were Dum-Dums, though it looked like all the blue ones had been picked out. Mr. Pierce noticed her noticing the jar, and offered her one. She picked one at random, and was disappointed to get grape, ate it anyway. She didn’t want to be rude to Mr. Pierce.

“I just wanted to check in on you,” Mr. Pierce said, pushing the blank paper and crayons towards her, “Why don’t you draw me a picture, and we’ll talk.”

Libby didn't know what to draw. Jane came to mind, but she didn't want to draw her, didn't want to think of her, didn't know what to do to help without making things worse. Libby began to draw her house while Mr. Pierce asked her questions. How was she feeling? How did she feel about school? Math? Reading? Did she look forward to going home at the end of the day? Was anyone bothering her? Was anyone hurting her?

*Jane*, Libby wanted to say, but that wasn't true, or if it was, it wasn't fair. Jane was hurting because she was being hurt, and she wasn't even meaning to do it.

"Ok Libby, I just have one more question and then I'll let you go to recess." Mr. Pierce inspected the picture she'd drawn carefully. He didn't find anything interesting there, and set it aside. "Libby, why don't you want to come to school anymore?"

"I don't know," Libby lied, looking down at the glossy fake wood surface of the desk.

"I don't think that's true. There must be a reason. Can you tell me what that is?"

Libby started to cry. She felt tired, and overwhelmed. She didn't want to be here. Mr. Pierce handed her a tissue.

"If you tell me, I can help."

When Libby didn't say anything else, Mr. Pierce didn't push any further.

"Why don't you think about it, and we'll talk again in a day or two?"

Libby nodded and rushed out of the room. She ran to the bathroom across the hall, and stayed in there crying, even after the bell rang for recess to be over, even after two announcements over the loudspeaker for her to return to class, until the school nurse came and found her, and escorted her back to her class, where Jane sat. Libby didn't look at her the rest of the day, even as she felt her get more and more anxious, felt her fear, felt her longing to run away, and never have to go home, when all Libby wanted to do was go home and never leave.

Libby was so exhausted, she fell asleep on the ride home after school, and when they got home, fell asleep while doing her homework. The phone ringing woke her up. She heard Mama talking, and tried to concentrate on her spelling words for that week.

“Libby,” Mama called down the hall to Libby’s room. “Phone for you.”

Libby walked down the hall, hoping it wasn’t somehow Jane, or Mr. Pierce. Mama hadn’t asked about it, but Libby was sure her talk with the teacher that morning was the reason for being called to his office.

“Hello,” Libby answered.

“Hello, Liberty Allen.” Great Grandmother’s weak voice echoed over the voice. Libby gave a soft smile. Great Grandmother always sounded like the happiest person to hear her voice when she answered the phone.

“I heard you haven’t been wanting to go to school.”

“No ma’am,” Liberty said, walking down the hallway, trailing her fingers on the wall slowly and feeling the smooth surface of the paint.

“Can you tell me why?”

“No ma’am.” Libby got to her bedroom, turned around, and walked down the hall again.

“Is it someone at school?”

Libby didn’t answer this time, only turned and walked back down the hall. She wondered if she would wear a trench in the carpet, like in a cartoon.

“Well, I can’t make you talk about it, if you’re not ready. But we all have the gifts we have for a reason, Liberty Allen,” great grandmother said, her voice fading slightly. “If someone is hurting, and you can help, then the right thing would be to help them.”

Libby was still. She wondered if Great Grandmother somehow knew what was going on, or if she was just guessing. She wondered, if all Allen's had special powers like she'd said, what Great Grandmother's power was. She wondered what Mama's was, as she peeked down the hallway to see if Libby was still on the phone.

"Think about if someone were hurting Ward, and only one person knew about it. What would you want that person to do?"

Libby closed her eyes, and felt like crying again. She nodded, and said "yes ma'am."

"Alright then. Give the phone back to your mama. I love you." Great Grandmother sounded more tired than Libby had ever heard her. Libby handed the phone to Mama and went to play with Ward in the living room where Sadie lay next to him, letting him run toy cars up and down her back. She didn't say anything about her talk with great grandmother to Mama, and Mama didn't ask, but she didn't try to hide the next morning, and Mama didn't seem surprised.

Mama dropped Libby off in the carpool lane that day. They were running a little behind, and the bell was about to ring. Another car pulled up as Libby was rushing up the school steps, and Libby stopped and looked back. Even though she couldn't hear it, she could see Jane's father yelling at her. Jane's head was bent, and she flinched away from, pushing herself against the car door. Finally he seemed to tell her she could get out, and she almost fell in her rush. Libby could feel the fear Jane felt, and she almost ran. But she waited for Jane to get to the top of the steps, and walked in the school together. Instead of going to class, Libby took Jane's hand and quietly brought her to Mr. Pierce's office. Jane was shaking so hard Libby thought she might fall.

"It'll be ok," Libby said. "I'll go with you. You don't have to be scared."

Jane didn't say anything. She was crying now, but she went with Libby up to the door, and didn't say anything as Libby knocked, hoping Mr. Pierce was in his office, not sure if either of them could work up the courage to do this again. Mr. Pierce open the door. There were crumbs in his short white beard, a half-eaten biscuit on his desk. He looked at the two girls and stepped back to let them in, shutting the door gently behind them.

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## VITA

Katie Mitchell was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi to John and Sharon Mitchell. She was raised in Dover, Tennessee. She is her father's youngest of three children, and her mother's only child. She attended high school at Stewart County High School, Tennessee, where she founded a creative writing club and petitioned the school to introduce a creative writing class to the curriculum. After high school, Katie attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga where she obtained her B. A. in English, Creative Writing, minoring in Entrepreneurship. During her undergraduate career, Katie maintained the Boyd Scholarship and the Prevost Scholarship, and was awarded the UCF Sally Young English Scholarship. She worked as a veterinary technician at the Stewart County Veterinary Clinic and as a caller for the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Call Center. She maintained her status on the Dean's List throughout her undergraduate career and was awarded Cum Laude honors. After graduating, Katie helped expand a small animal boarding and grooming business and traveled abroad before returning to the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga to earn her Master's in English, Creative Writing. During her time as a graduate student, she was awarded the UCF Margaret Kelley Graduate English scholarship, and she worked as the managing editor for the Signal Mountain Review, helping to achieve its initial launch. She currently works as a training aid and technical writer at OrthoBanc, helping to plan and implement new training strategies to improve customer service and encourage overall company growth.