

AWARD-WINNING BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ASHLEY FONTAINE

GROWL

WHEN EVIL ARRIVED, ALL
OF MISSISSIPPI HEARD IT

ASHLEY
FONTAINE

ROWL

a novel



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Dedication

For my Mother,

*Joanna Lee Doster, Donna Thompson, Betty
Dravis and Donna Lickteig.*

*My heartfelt thanks to each of you for all
the support and encouragement given.*

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www.number75themovie.com

Eviscerating the Snake Trilogy:

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The Magnolia Series – co-authored with Lillian

Hansen

Blood Ties

Blood Loss

Blood Stain

CHAPTER ONE



My name is Sheryl Ilene Newcomb. And yes, my initials are S.I.N. A funny little piece of whimsical humor my parents found amusing when I arrived. Mom and Dad were two high school sweethearts who adored their guns, their beer, and their self-appointed titles of King and Queen of the Rebellious Rednecks. The day I was born, they didn't think anyone in the town would have the mental acuity to put two and two together to discover their little inside joke. Shame on the pathetic excuses who called themselves teachers in this dreary city because Mom and Dad had been right: no one caught on to their little attempt at humor.

Then, it turned out to be true. Looking back with wiser eyes now, my family and I concluded that the events leading up to my transformation started the summer I turned nine. But the day we realized there was a problem, and no turning back, was a week before I started my senior year at Junction City High. The day the fangs and claws appeared and the monster inside of me emerged. When

mutilated corpses appeared near a pile of brush down by Caney Creek, everything changed.

That day I changed—forever—because evil woke up and growled, its ominous rumblings heard by every living thing in Locasia County, Mississippi.

CHAPTER TWO



It was all over—for now. The ending completed, and the living nightmare of what happened in our sleepy little town nothing more than a permanent stain embedded in my mind and body. I stared at the words on the page, the white paper covered in bright blue ink. The empty pages behind it waited, impatient for me to add more. They sat in mocking silence on the desk in front of me. A twinge of apprehension slithered up my back.

What am I doing?

During the last three months, I thought I'd done a decent job of stopping the memories. None of what happened was something anyone could be prepared to endure. No longer did the vile sounds and unbelievable images pop up during the middle of the day. I felt a sense of pride I stopped them without the use of medication. With the support of my mom and dad and the Lord above, I worked daily to bury the horrific events.

I shivered at the disturbing recollections. When the crystal clear images of the final battle exploded inside my head, they turned my slender torso into a shivering pile of goose bumps. I was unable to stop the screams of agony and anger when my mind replayed the events at night. Physical and mental anguish would slam into my body and soul as I fought not only the animal inside of me, but the one that stared at me from inside my mind.

The eerie visions of the final confrontation were as terrifying in my mind's eye as the actual day they occurred. Dark, jade-green eyes lit from within bored through my own with their anticipatory killing stare. The growl from its furry throat would seem as loud in my memories as it did when it happened. The flexed muscles of the creature jerked in its readiness to shred me down to a bloody pile of mush. The bright moon's rays shimmered off of its stark white fangs. One swipe of the enormous paw or bite from the strong jaws would end it all. My cries of sorrow erupted at night when the images of the dismembered corpses appeared inside my mind. They were seared into my memory banks. I hadn't experienced a moment of heart-stopping, frozen-to-one-spot freakouts in two months during the daytime. I whittled them down to only haunting my dreams at night.

Progress, plain and simple.

A sound caught my attention, so I lifted my stare from the ruled, white paper on the desk and looked out my bedroom window. My sharp, one-eyed gaze glanced over to the pool and settled on the old, rusty swing at the edge of our backyard. I recalled with a slight smile the day last week when I took my first step out of the house and sat outside for almost an hour. The warmth of the sun and the gentle urges of my mother's voice lured me into the

water—at least the shallow end. I considered it a big leap in my recovery progress since I had developed a strong distaste for water. I had sat on the bottom step, the cool water barely up to my shins, and fought the urge to run back inside and lock myself inside my bedroom. The task of quelling my paralyzing fears had taken every ounce of mental strength to overcome. It was beyond weird at my age, but I felt safe in my adolescent bedroom. It was my territory. But I also knew it would become my prison if I didn't learn to live outside its four walls again. Like a normal, sane person lives.

A quiet snicker from my lips bounced off the walls of my room. Sanity. Normalcy. Those ships sailed away *eons* ago, pulled under the dark waters of the mighty Mississippi River, never to be seen again.

The cold pencil in my right hand was my only weapon now—and I hoped all I would ever need again. My other, formidable weapons I kept well hidden after I learned to control them. Well, not actually control but coexist with them.

I took a long, hard look at the slender pencil and gave myself a mental kick for my decision to relive it all. Only yesterday, I had made the complete transition between the house and the backyard without a hitch or any assistance or prodding from my parents. My doctor and physical therapist, Dr. Joanna Montray, told us when she visited yesterday, I was making significant progress toward recovery. I recalled the air of bemusement from the good doctor while she took my vitals. Dr. Montray stopped asking weeks ago why we refused to let the wounds be cared for at the hospital. The answer was always the same. Silence. As Dr. Montray's warm fingers poked and prodded my old injuries, she had seemed pleased my limp was less pro-

nounced and the numerous scars had become a light pink rather than blaring red.

I refused to show any outward emotion when Dr. Montray announced in her calm, gentle way that my eye would never recover. She followed her statement with assurance that the left eye had fully taken over duties from the useless right one. Unable to blink enough to keep my eyeball wet, the black eye patch would need to stay in place a while longer. The only smidgeon of comfort was it didn't need to be removed.

I already lost enough.

Dr. Montray seemed happy when she discovered me outside in the backyard by the pool and commented on the benefits of the sun. It would help the healing process she'd said with genuine enthusiasm. Vitamin D from the warm rays would accelerate my recovery. But as Dr. Montray examined me, I sensed her uneasiness at being so close to me. My broken bones had already healed in record time. My shattered pelvis and right leg should have taken months to mend.

Instead, they took less than three weeks.

The doctor's hands quaked with a slight tremble, yet her movements were skilled and quick while she gave me the world's fastest exam. With irritation, I smiled and nodded in agreement, even though what I really wanted to do was burst out into a wild cackle. Seriously? Recovery? None of us would ever be the same.

Ever.

Mom must have sensed the doctor's thoughts or something because she intervened and maneuvered Dr. Montray toward the front door. Of course, Mom knew the truth and played along in the deceitful storyline she helped to concoct. The Newcomb clan told the police,

medical staff, reporters, and anyone who dared ask about what had happened, our little contrived tale. The whole town bought our story, but that was only because their minds had been manipulated. Only my little family knew the entire truth, and we sure weren't going to let it out. No one would believe us anyway, even if we did decide to open our mouths.

Thinking about the doctor's visit yesterday agitated me. I slammed the pencil down on the old oak desk with too much force. A small crack appeared where my fist connected. I shoved aside the memories of the good doctor's visit and sought out other musings to stew upon.

A few days after I regained consciousness from the final showdown, it was discussed in hushed tones inside the relative safety of our kitchen what we should do next. The topic on the table was if the family should pack up a few bags and split town. We had plenty of reasons to leave and few to stay, but we reached the decision to remain. In some weird, creepy way, staying in what the entire family knew as home was comforting. Gratifying might be a better way to describe it. It was, after all, my territory, forever marked with the stain of not only my blood, but the blood of those I loved. My contribution to the conversation, and what I believe swayed my parents to stay, was since I fought the battle and won, why would I give up the spoils of war? Six generations of Newcomb's had owned the land, and the ones who lived and died there before us worked it as sharecroppers before they became land owners. Like it or not, the soil ran deep and gave as much life to us as our blood did, so we stayed.

My valiant speech, full of pride and determination, was not the truth. We all knew it, yet no one brought the

real subject up. We wouldn't leave because it was my duty, my hereditary destiny, to remain.

To catch a better view out the window, I cocked my head. The sounds of children playing outside at recess at McC Carson Elementary had caught my attention earlier. Miles away from my house, it was still eerie to me to hear things from such a distance. I shook the thought away and tried to find some contentment and comfort in the meticulous backyard, groomed to perfection by my mother, or the four walls of our small house—walls which hid me away from the rest of the world and helped muffle my screams of anguish at night. It was the same framing and basic design as it had been when Pop-pop built it in 1925. The house was one of a handful that hadn't been washed away in the flood of 1927, and it sported updated plumbing and electrical work. When other families moved back into town, they must have all thought Pop-pop did a great job on the design because the homes that lined our block looked almost identical. The town's layout was probably an exact replica of every other small, southern town in the Delta region.

But for me, nothing was the same.

Junction City, Mississippi, was still full of gossipy women. Ones who flitted about, their mouths eager to drop the latest juicy stories into the prickling ears of whomever would hold still long enough to listen. The bored wives of the town's mayor, police chief, and two lawyers were the worst of the bunch. How many times I had overheard them at the diner, pretending to whisper to each other, but really, speaking loud enough that most of the customers would hear the latest news? All of their hen parties were conducted while they slurped down dessert to add to the wide load they already carried. An ant couldn't

walk across a blade of crisp grass with a crumb of cake on its back without it becoming a topic of discussion. God knows they had a lot to chirp about after the events of the last few months. Their tongues would explode from being overworked. The murders, fires, and massive explosion would keep them gabbing well into their graves. Their tongues might give out before their chubby bodies expired.

Some of the younger folks, like me, had whined about poor cell phone reception and slower-than-cold-molasses Internet speed. Last summer, a few of us combined our talents. We put together a slick presentation for the board members of the Quorum Court, requesting newer, faster equipment. We had it all worked out—fancy charts full of financial figures of the costs and benefits to the community. It was just a simple matter of getting the phone company to come in and install a new tower and lines. Easy as baking an apple pie, we said. The expenditure would benefit all of the residents of the county, including all students and our ability to study and learn online at a faster pace.

For school and studying purposes, of course. None of us had kept a straight face when that little lie popped out, and our request was denied. Dane had laughed and said that a faster form of communication was not necessary since we had the lightning fast tongues of the local Gossip Queens.

Friday night football games, and the players gifted with athletic ability, still ruled the school and the town. Even though our basketball team, led by Dane, won the state basketball championship last year, football reigned supreme. It seemed the town was drawn to the violent, bone-crushing tackles and acrobatic catches by the play-

ers. Football brought out the beast in everyone, and basketball simply did not.

The six block radius which made up the downtown section shut down every Sunday, except for the two restaurants, one of which my family owned. Both opened precisely after church ended. Preston's Gas-N-Go, another business in its fifth generation of family ownership, was the only place to get your fuel, including diesel for all the farmers. During harvest season, the line of vehicles waiting to get gas would sometimes be twenty deep.

If you wanted something from Wilson's Sundries, you'd better get it before the store closed at 11:59 pm on the dot each Saturday. If, God forbid, your kid was sick and needed medicine, you ran out of tampons, sore throat lozenges, chips or snacks, or had a hankering for chocolate, you were out of luck. That is, unless you wanted to drive over forty miles to the nearest Walmart or hospital in Greenville.

Each year, trampy cheerleaders bounced around the downtown area in short skirts and skintight tops. They blinked their heavily painted eyelids at the shopkeepers to pledge donations for the school. Well, really for the football team, but that was an unspoken understanding. And each year, the store owners caved to the pressure and hurled cash at the girls, even if their money drawers were running on fumes. It was good practice for the girls for later in life while they worked stripper poles at the casinos in Greenville or Helena.

I smirked at the memory of the last time I had been a part of the fleecing because I made sure some of the money went to the basketball team. Yesterday, while I sat in the very same spot, I watched the newest batch of young meat strut up and down Main Street, led by the new head cheer-

leader, Savannah. She had taken my place at the helm of the Junction City Cheering Cats. Even after everything that happened, the lives lost and the survivors damaged beyond repair, vanity still trumped sorrow.

Bitter and harsh, but the truth hurts. And I had every right to think such things because before my transformation, I had been one of those gals. I had no qualms about parading around the streets like I owned the place. That type of behavior was ingrained in young females since the dawn of time. The outcome of displaying sexual availability was always the same—to find a mate. It ensured the next generation would be produced. The only thing that changed with each new crop of teenagers was the way they conducted themselves. My generation had no moral hang-ups and embraced our sexuality with fervor.

I had been a tad different than the rest of my small peer group. I only wielded my budding sexuality as a teaser, a tantalizing glimpse, in front of the locals. The only person I let experience the full package was my boyfriend, Dane. None of the other country bumpkins piqued my interest in the slightest. Oh, I had my fair share of crushes when I first hit puberty, but they were innocent and harmless. My first real date had been with Dane Witherspoon V, and once we held hands while walking down the main part of town, I was hooked.

Some of my friends didn't just play the part—they lived it. They gave the Gossip Queens at the diner lots to talk about when one cheerleader, Tami Rogers, became the proud parent of a bouncing baby boy in her sophomore year. The father, Drexel Kilgore Jr., was the son of the biggest rice farmer in the county. According to the wagging tongues, Drexel Jr. didn't exactly go for girls. Rumors spread about a few others who went down to

Greenville to take care of unpleasant and unwanted situations. Dr. Montray was the only physician in town, and she didn't offer that type service. I overheard my parents discuss it one night after dinner years ago, right after Dr. Montray set up her practice. They both agreed it was a strong stance for the young doctor to take. I think they sort of admired her grit and determination to uphold what she saw was her duty—save lives, not take them.

Most of my former friends hopped from the back of one pickup truck bed to another during our high school years. Once they learned power rested on their chest and between their legs, they used it. Daily. Like every other woman had done when her hips widened, her rump spread, and her boobs appeared since the dawn of time. Hell, Tami Kilgore (*nee* Rogers) lived the high life at the Kilgore place because of her skills, her offspring the newest heir to the Kilgore fortune.

Well, she *used* to live there. Now, Drexel and his parents were raising little Drex alone. What pieces of Tami left big enough to gather and bury were crammed inside a pink casket six feet under in Ridgemoor Cemetery, Tami's plan to reign as the "Queen Bee of Locasia County" ripped to shreds.

Right along with her innards.

No stripper pole for me, though. I had big plans which included a move to Memphis with Dane. We had it all worked out. Graduation, summer break in Panama City, then on to the excitement of living in a big city, away from the backwoods muck pile we'd been raised in. Dane's stellar basketball skills landed him a full scholarship with the Tigers, and my knack for science won my acceptance to the same school—though not on a full ride. After the first year of living in the freshman dorms, Dane and I would move

in with my cousin, Corinne, in her two bedroom apartment. Corinne offered us the opportunity to stay rent free until we graduated. It was a sweet deal because I would get to keep part of the tip share while I cooked three nights each week at Corinne's restaurant. My parents agreed to help with financial aid, excited their only child would be a college graduate—the first in our family.

Best laid plans...

I raised my misty eye from my backyard. I looked past the tops of the little houses lining the streets beyond the central part of town. My gaze landed on the blackened patch of earth known as Cohestra Industries. The place used to take up over twenty acres, parking lot included. Nothing was left except the grain silos and the smaller outbuildings. The silos stood next to each other like two orphaned children in front of the soot-covered debris of their childhood home.

A surge of energy prickled in my skin. The hairs on the back of my neck stood erect as my hackles raised. My fingers gripped the table with such force, my thick nails dug into the hard wood. A low rumble rose from deep within. My chair shook from the vibrations. The guttural growl reverberated inside the walls of my chest. It was one thing to recall the night in my head, but looking at the charred leftovers of the real thing was quite another. The strong pull of the evil inside, buried under the piles of rubble, made me gasp in pain. I blinked and moved my gaze away, focusing on the Newcomb's Diner sign about six miles from town.

In ignorant bliss, generations of townspeople born and raised inside the confines of Locasia County lived quiet lives. In the heart of the Mississippi Delta country, the roots to the founding fathers ran deep and long, like the

namesake mighty river. The entire region lived, breathed, and died farming. Mostly rice but a few cotton and sugar cane fields remained. Unlike the rest of the region, our county was profitable—and relatively crime free. Over the years, some adventurous souls slipped through the cracks and escaped. Unwilling to live around the stubborn, old fashioned etiquette and pace of the place, they wanted the fast lane lifestyles only found in the bigger cities—like I intended to do. But those escapees were few and far between. Most stayed because their roots, like my own, tethered them to the fertile soil.

Once the first breath was drawn in the town, the tie was sealed. Forever.

Guess I haven't been fair with my portrayal of Junction City. As with all places where humans live, it was peppered with people with hearts full of hate, but also those with hearts of love. Kind souls like crazy Nana, sweet Meemaw, Mom, and Dad. Of course I felt that way about them, for they were family, so it didn't seem fair to include them. But folks like Papa Joe and Shirlene—both of them worked at the diner ever since I could remember. Papa Joe cooked and Shirlene waited tables for over thirty years. They were real, down-home people full of warmth and kindness. Most people in Junction City would literally give you the shirt off their backs if you needed it or a warm meal and an interested ear to listen to your grievances. The majority of our community was full of good people.

But when weighed against the few evil ones, it didn't matter.

I took a deep breath and focused my attention back to my original plan. The fear of being outside had finally been conquered, so it was time to confront the last hurdle looming in front of me. In one of our last conversations,

Papa Joe said I needed to pass the truth along to the next generation. Prepare the next guardian. It was part of my duty. Plus, I had to dislodge the memories and remove them from my dreams before I went completely bonkers. Well, not dreams. The appropriate word for the broken sleep, ear-splitting screams, and sweat-soaked sheets would be night terrors.

Mom brought home a new typewriter yesterday. Her rationale was if I started to write things down, they would leave my head and vanish into the air. Or stick to the pages and be trapped forever. I had not told her about Papa Joe's admonitions to keep the next generation informed. I smiled at the memory, Mom's face so full of love and worry after she set the ancient thing on my desk. I still wasn't used to the snow-white hair on her head and had snickered a bit at the messy mass of curls that stuck up every which way. I pecked at the dirty, old keys a while last night, but soon realized I would never get the hang of using it—there was no backspace key. So I decided to use pencil and paper.

I planned to write about ancient evil, so I may as well do it old-school style.

With shaky fingers, I picked the pencil back up and hovered over the blank pages. The decision of where to start first seemed difficult. The beginning would be the most appropriate spot, since most stories start out that way. But I wasn't entirely sure when everything changed—at least in my life. The history of what I had become, and why, I understood from countless hours spent listening to Papa Joe. His sweet, rhythmic voice explained with the utmost patience the ancient ways and answered my multitude of disbelieving questions with ease. He never flinched, never balked at my rude responses

and some of the hateful things I'd said to him in the beginning.

God, how I miss him.

To exorcise the awful memories, to try and dislodge the painful thoughts from my mind, I shouldn't start out by lying. I knew the moment things changed for me. A tremor of fear made my heart beat faster. Was I really doing the right thing by letting the wickedness from my head escape, knowing it still lingered in the town? In all the years, the story had never been written down, only passed orally from one generation to the next. Mom worried about that too, which was why she bought me a typewriter rather than a computer. Once the words were freed from my mind, she wanted me to burn them, chapter by chapter, so no copy would be around. That way, nothing would be left but a small pile of ashes—gray, lifeless ashes to be spread out over the blackened embers of what had been the wicked heart of Junction City before it burned to the ground.

Mom hoped the soot of my mind-altering fear would be the adhesive that kept the lid sealed shut on the evil that nearly killed me...and the entire town.

I would let Mom continue that line of thinking for a while. After all, she had to heal as well. So did Dad, for that matter. I wasn't ready to drop the next bombshell on either of them yet because if I told them the *real* reason I was writing, they would flip their proverbial lids.

I gripped the pencil harder, the sweat beginning to bead on my brow, and began where I should.

At the beginning.