

PROMPT #2: You've been raised all your life to fulfill a prophecy, only for the seer to realize they were mistaken — you have no great destiny after all. What do you do now?

Memories, A Curse

by **Bethany Parker**

Jedidiah Cade Underwood could distinctly recall when he was thirteen and Granny and Papaw invited folks over to pray the *haints* out of their house...

It was the second time in his life Brother Titus *laid hands* on Cade. Only this time he told Papaw that Cade would not amount to anything:

“Boy ain’t worth the food you feed ‘em,” he had said – red and thin-lipped. He’d said it with a dribble of spit clinging to the corner of his mouth. The blunt words a shock.

“But you already prayed over the boy,” Papaw protested, pointing an accusatory, but not outright hostile, finger at Titus. “Said he’d be smart. Make something out of himself.”

Titus Leroy Waller wasn’t much to look at. An aging man with wrinkles likely exacerbated by the ever-present scowl on his face. Cade never could quite understand how a man of the Lord always seemed so hateful, so angry.

He even prayed angrily. Shouts of harsh words about sinners burning in hellfire.

All the little bit of hair Titus had was mostly accounted for in his eyebrows and beard. He wasn’t so much a large person as he was a looming presence; and his eyes made Cade think of the buzzards that pecked and pecked at carcasses on the side of the road.

It wasn’t just his eyes. It was his demeanor. Pecking and pecking at the softest, fleshiest parts of people until he had his fill.

It unnerved Cade.

Titus was known in every nearby holler as a seeing man. He had an eye. A gift from the Lord. So when he told Granny and Papaw that their last living grandson, the boy they had put so much faith into raising, wouldn't ever amount to anything, it was akin to sealing the curse that was already upon their house. Cade was their last hope. The boy meant to pull the whole family up by their bootstraps. If Cade couldn't do it. No one could.

"I can't change it, Hiram. Boy ain't worth nothing," he had practically spat the words in Cade's direction.

It was a curse worse than *haints*. It solidified their futures. *Haints* could easily be prayed away, but how did you save your people when a mouthpiece of God Himself said you could never? Would never.

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A curse on the Underwood home and the Underwood people.

It was well-known that the Underwood family in the holler of Pleasant Ridge was cursed. You didn't have all but two of your kin killed or dead and escape talk of a curse. In the best of times, people likened them to Job in the Bible, reassuring them all that it was just a trial from God, a way of testing their faithfulness because they were some of the best folks.

In the worst of times, they were pariahs – not invited to weddings or get togethers because surely they were being punished for sinfulness, and who were their neighbors to intervene in a punishment from the Almighty?

Titus and all the folks at church pretended to pity them, to care about them, but Cade was convinced they enjoyed it. They liked having all the attention focused on someone else, relishing the Underwoods' lives to keep their own family affairs hidden. Happy to have some kindling for judgement and gossip.

"Them poor Underwoods. Haints in the house and the devil in their girl."

"And a boy who ain't quite right...if you know what I mean."

Lalie and the Devil

Eulalie Underwood wasn't always filled with the devil. For the most part, she'd been a good girl. It wasn't until she was fourteen and had her first blood that the devil got a smell for her.

Granny called conversations about menstruation *women's talk*. But with no mama of their own, Lalie had taken it upon herself to mother her younger brother; and she told him that a man needed to know about women.

“There’s too many damn idiots,” she had said, holding out a sanitary napkin for Cade to look at. “It’s called a pad, and girls put it in their panties so this doesn’t happen,” in her other hand she held up blood-stained undergarments.

Briefly, she turned her back to him so that she could turn on the sink tap. Cade watched her as she started to scrub at the fabric, the water in the sink becoming a pale brown.

Lalie looked at him seriously, but her eyes were always soft, “It’s called a period. Granny said I’m not supposed to talk to you or Papaw about it, but that’s a bunch of bullshit. It’s gonna happen to all the girls in your class soon enough; and the last thing they need is another dummy laughing when they got blood on their skirts.”

“How’d you learn all this?” Cade loved Lalie. She was more a mama to him than Granny was, and she was always teaching him something. Up until a few months ago, he had crawled into Lalie’s bed every night so she could sing him lullabies or tell him stories. She’d done it since he was a baby.

Now that Lalie was a woman, Papaw threatened to whip him if he found Cade in her bed anymore. That had confused him and angered Lalie.

Granny and Papaw often did or said things that made Lalie angry, but it wasn’t until now that Cade remembered her ever voicing it to them. In the past, she would gripe or sulk. Now she voiced it.

“He’s still mostly a baby! He don’t know nothing about nothing. And not got a mean bone in his body. You ought to worry about all the men trying to get a peek instead of worrying about Cade,” she screamed it in Papaw’s face, but she had tears streaming down her cheeks.

“What do you mean, girl?” Granny intervened, jerking Lalie’s arm hard and pulling her close before Papaw could respond.

Cade watched as Granny and Lalie shared a look, Granny’s scowl dissipating as her eyes filled with tears too.

Later that night, Cade watched Granny hold Lalie, threading her brittle, wrinkled fingers through Lalie’s hair – singing her granddaughter the same lullabies that Cade liked to hear Lalie sing.

It was *women’s talk*. That was what Lalie said when Cade asked what happened. She climbed into his bed and held her little brother close. Papaw didn’t say anything.

Cade had not known what any of it meant back then when he was nine years old, but he knew now.

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Cade watched his sister cross her arms over her chest and kick at the pew in front of her. They were the only ones left in the one-room church. Everyone else was outside. It was a church picnic day. Cade could hear laughter drifting in from the open windows. Faint wafts from the scents of good foods tickled his nose and made his stomach grumble.

There was really no reason for him to be inside, but he had a habit of trailing Lalie wherever she went.

She was inside because Papaw had whipped her for being rude, and now she was sulking.

“The Bible can’t teach you everything, Cade,” she uncrossed her arms long enough to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. “Granny didn’t learn how to make cobbler for the picnic from the Bible, did she? And did Papaw figure out how to fix the truck by reading about Jesus?”

Her questions made Cade giggle, and that, in turn, made Lalie smile. She was beautiful all the time, but especially so when she smiled.

Her doe-eyes brightened when she smiled. Granny – half-jokingly, half-seriously – liked to say Lalie could marry anybody she wanted if she would just learn to keep her mouth shut. She was the prettiest girl around.

“Being pretty ain’t a gift,” she had argued.

“I love that you’re smart as a whip and sharp as a tack, honey,” Granny told her all the time, “but, my God, girl, you have got to learn to hold your tongue. All men ain’t as forgiving as your Papaw.”

Lalie had yet to learn this; and it was what got her in trouble.

She wasn’t just asking Cade rhetorically how Granny and Papaw learned to bake and fix. She was asking to assert that she had made a good point in the middle of the sermon by saying people needed to read more books than the Holy Bible.

It was the first time anyone had said out loud – let alone in a crowded church house – that Brother Titus could be wrong.

Later, Cade would look back at this as the culminating catalyst for bringing alive the rumor that Lalie was filled with the devil. The definitive moment for solidifying their belief in the Underwood curse. He would wonder if there was anything he – a boy who wouldn’t amount to anything – could have done to save Lalie from the rumors.

Only a girl with the devil in her would question the word of God.

A Boy Named Jedidiah

“Papaw, why do you think we’re cursed?” It was an innocent question, asked by an innocent boy. Cade and his grandfather were outside tinkering with the truck. As far as Cade knew, nothing was currently wrong with it. It was a way for them to pass time together when Granny and Lalie couldn’t be bothered with entertaining either of them.

It was a warm, pleasant day. So much so that Granny had threatened she would lock them outside if they came back in one more time before she finished cooking.

“Only the Lord knows, Cade,” Papaw ruffled Cade’s hair with the palm of his hand, an affectionate gesture that reassured Cade.

They were quiet for several moments – long enough that Cade believed the conversation to be over – before Papaw asked, “You know what your name means?”

“No, sir.”

Papaw wiped his greasy hands on a towel before passing it to Cade to wipe his own, unstained hands. Silently, Cade mirrored his grandfather’s actions before following him to the large front porch.

They sat down and sipped from the water glasses that Granny left for them.

“We named you Jedidiah because in the Bible it means *beloved of the Lord*. When you were born, I took one look at you and knew that you would be something special. I was right,” he smiled.

And he was right. Just two days ago, Brother Titus had laid hands on Cade and prophesied that the little boy would live up to his namesake. He would be the one to lift the curse afflicting the Underwood household:

“No longer will Maggie and Hiram Underwood have to worry about laying their loved ones to rest day after day, year after year. I say, in the name of Jesus, this curse will be lifted; and just like his name declares, Jedidiah Cade Underwood will be beloved by our Lord. He will deliver his people from the treacherous hold of this curse.”

It had been a lengthy and loud proclamation, the church ladies around him praying in tongues as Titus shouted the decree that Cade was destined for greatness. Saving one’s people was the greatest destiny of all. Titus had made this connection too, likening Cade to Moses who led his people out of the Pharaoh’s grasp.

It was a lot of responsibility for a little boy, but Cade had all the confidence of a child yet to see the brokenness of the world.

Prayers of Preparation

“Lalie, honey, can you get me more eggs? I’ve done broke these, and I want to get the cornbread cooking before everyone gets here.”

Pretty near everyone from church would be at their house soon. They had *haints*. Evil spirits roaming the Earth and tormenting their family. Lalie woke up with scratches on her arm, and Cade heard knocking and scratching on the floors. Granny and Papaw both swore they saw a dark shadow sitting at the kitchen table. There was no way to explain it all.

They had all been so scared that everyone had taken to sleeping in the same room with the door locked and wedged with a chair. The lock and chair couldn’t really stop a spirit, but it did make them all feel better.

Cade and Lalie had gathered all the blankets and pillows in the house to create a pallet on the floor of Granny and Papaw’s bedroom floor, but no one really slept.

They talked, and sang, and prayed until they were all so exhausted that their eyes finally shut.

They woke up in the mornings dreary and skittish – afraid that every sound they heard was evilness ready to torment them.

But no longer.

They would have a prayer circle and Bible reading all night to cast out the haints that had decided the Underwood house was their new playground.

“Yes, ma’am,” Lalie called on her way out the front door.

Their chicken coop was beside the barn and a ways from the house, but when Lalie had not returned after several minutes, Cade could see Granny’s impatience.

She was pacing the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets.

“I’ll go get her, Granny,” he volunteered. He felt like he was wasting space anyway. Granny didn’t like his help in the kitchen. She complained of him being underfoot, and always asked him if there wasn’t some men’s work that needed tending whenever he spent too long in the house.

He should have gone into town with Papaw, but the errands had seemed boring at the time.

“Lord, please let this work,” Granny started praying out loud while still pacing the kitchen, her only indication that she heard Cade was a nod in his direction, “please cast these spirits out of our house and deliver us from this evil. We can’t take much more. Lift this curse from us.”

“Amen!” he called out before leaving the house and walking to the coop. It was taking Lalie a long time.

He didn’t see his sister, but he heard movement – not from the coop, but from the side of the barn. Out of sight.

“Let me go, you piece of shit,” he heard Lalie seethe.

When Cade rounded the corner of their barn, he saw his sister’s tempest of black curls whipping around her face as she turned sharply to pull herself out of Titus Waller’s grasp and spit in his face.

“Lalie?” Cade called. The worry evident in his voice. Cade was thirteen. Pretty much a man, but he didn’t know anything about fighting...and this looked like an instance in which fighting may be necessary.

Titus immediately let go of her, and Lalie began smoothing both her hair and summer dress.

“I’m okay,” she assured, rushing to his side. But he saw the way her body trembled, the way the reassurance didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Granny’s looking for you. Waiting on them eggs,” his voice was stronger than he thought it would be as he spoke the words directly to Titus.

Lalie gathered up her basket, long forgotten, and rushed towards the house, leaving Cade to stare at Titus.

The man’s eyes were angry.

“Ain’t nothing to discuss, boy. Your sister needs to learn some manners. You know that as well as anybody. Devil’s got ahold of that girl.”

Titus walked away before Cade.

“Leave Lalie alone,” he called after the man’s back. “She ain’t done nothing to nobody.”

“Think you’re a big man, now,” Titus stalked towards Cade, his finger pointing accusatorily, “we’ll see about that. I’ll teach you and your sister a thing about manners. A thing about respecting your elders.”

Death of the Devil

Revival was a time when everyone came to church. A week of worshipping and fellowship. Cade liked it even though he didn’t really like sitting through the services. He liked

seeing his friends and eating dinner together on the church's front lawn every evening.

It filled him with a sense of pride for his community. Everyday folks coming together for a bigger purpose.

He was sitting, laughing with a few other boys from school when Lalie's sweetheart approached them.

"Cade, you seen your sister? She went to get some wildflowers for the little girls, but I can't find her," Gideon was the best match in town for Lalie. Gideon loved her almost as much as Papaw, Granny, and he did. He liked that Lalie was as smart as she was pretty and that she wasn't shy about sharing her thoughts.

"You check the orchard?" It was the name of a little spot on the church's land that had three or four crab apple trees, "she likes to get apples for the little'ns whenever she goes to get flowers." Cade stood and dusted the dirt off his pants, already on his way to help look for his sister.

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Cade couldn't remember killing Brother Titus – the man formerly known as preacher, prophet, and seeing man.

He didn't remember rushing back to the church, or grabbing the shotgun from his family's truck, or hollering at Papaw and Gideon to come on.

In the periphery of his mind, he did remember Lalie screaming, seeing the blood splatters across her cheek and the dark, growing red blossom on Titus's back as he lay face down on top of her.

He was lucky the shot hadn't killed Lalie too.

For sixteen years, Lalie had been the one to protect Cade. He reckoned it was time enough that he did the same for her.

All he could remember was seeing Lalie pinned to the ground, her chest and face pressed so hard into the grass that left marks on her cheek.

Titus was sitting on top of her, a knee on either side of her hips as he wrestled with both his own and her clothing.

She was crying but couldn't seem to scream.

And that was all Cade remembered before being taken back to the church.

Granny was tending to him. Wiping his face tenderly and murmuring things about him being a fine young man, about the honor in protecting his people.

Now, A Curse Lifted

There was never a curse. Just people.

Cade believes there were two kinds of people in the world – folks making mistakes and doing the best they could; and others taking advantage and abusing their power.

“Folks won’t come lookin’,” Brother Floyd is their new preacher, and he’s gathered everyone together at the church. He addresses the questions that have made everyone anxious, “he’s buried out in the cemetery now, and if his people come looking – which I doubt will happen – we can direct them straight to that plot of dirt. No harm, no foul,” he dusted his hands, indicating that it was something they could wash their hands of.

No harm, no foul. An odd choice of words, Cade thought, considering he had shot the man.

“Lalie, honey, come on up here,” Brother Floyd’s voice is tender, inviting.

She’s been different in the days since Titus was killed. He reckons they all are. That they will be forever.

Their family is sitting on the second pew. Lalie is sandwiched between Gideon and Granny. Cade watches as she reluctantly let’s go of Gideon’s hand and makes her way to the front of the church.

“You too, my boy,” Floyd directs his words towards Cade now, “come on up.”

Once they are at the front of the church, Lalie gives Cade a sidelong look; and he’s happy to realize that her eyes are still soft, her strong spirit wounded but not gone.

“You did the Lord’s work protecting your sister,” Floyd’s voice is firm and loud so that everyone in the church can hear him.

“Unfortunately, we had a wolf in sheep’s clothing in our midst and no one saw it but you’uns. For that, we all thank you.”

Everyone started clapping, and Cade could see that many people, including Papaw and Granny, were crying.

And for a boy who wasn’t supposed to amount to anything, Cade thought that he had done all right.