



On Shifting Sand — A NOVEL —

ALLISON
PITTMAN

PRAISE FOR ALLISON PITTMAN

“Grace seeks us when we have nothing to give. Grace is indiscriminate passion. It is traumatizing and irresistible all at once. And grace is impossible to look away from when our soul is desperate, longing, and aching to be known. For this, readers will squeeze these pages tightly until the last drop of Allison’s words releases us to heave a deep sigh of liberation. As our own sin and longing to be loved by something greater than us is threaded into the person of Nola, and as Russ brings the fresh realization that we are loved with nothing to do on our part, this book will come to life in the hearts of sinners like you and me, saved only by grace. As a woman who has been radically loved through my own season of infidelity, I find hope and the heartbeat of truth in this book. I highly recommend this breathtaking read!”

KASEY VAN NORMAN, bestselling author of *Named by God* and *Raw Faith*

“Deftly intertwining the 1920s plotline with diary entries, Pittman’s third series outing is filled with family drama, suspense, and enough twists and turns to keep readers engrossed until the very end. This tale of truth and forgiveness will attract fans of Francine Rivers and Rosamunde Pilcher, and those who enjoy family sagas.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *All for a Sister*

“Pittman handily captures the societal extremes during the Jazz Age, and her focus on the roles of women, from demure traditionalists to the influential McPherson and the ‘modern’ woman, adds a nuanced level of conflict to this entertaining novel.”

BOOKLIST on *All for a Story*

“Pittman skillfully paints the complete picture of this bold female character. Readers of inspirational fiction will be stirred as this story of longing unfolds, revealing testimony to true contentment.”

BOOKLIST on All for a Song

“A wonderful story that captures a period of time from the past that many of us have learned about in history classes, but in a way that makes it come to life.”

ONLINE REVIEWER, All for a Story

“Mesmerizing. . . . Allison Pittman’s latest novel is a delight to read, having been woven together with beautiful narrative, stirring faith, and characters you will connect with. . . . *All for a Song* is a book that will not only entertain you, but will leave you thinking about why we make the choices we do, and even how we use the gifts God has given us.”

ONLINE REVIEWER, All for a Song

On Shifting Sand — A NOVEL —

ALLISON
PITTMAN



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Allison Pittman at www.allisonpittman.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

On Shifting Sand

Copyright © 2015 by Allison Pittman. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of woman copyright © Ashley Lebedov. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of torn paper copyright © vinzstudio/Dollar Photo Club. All rights reserved.

Author photograph copyright © 2010 by Bluefire Photography. All rights reserved.

Designed by Ron Kaufmann

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Scripture in the author's acknowledgments taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

On Shifting Sand is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pittman, Allison.

On shifting sand / Allison Pittman.

pages ; cm

ISBN 978-1-4143-9044-4 (sc)

I. Title.

PS3616.I885O5 2015

813'.6—dc22

2014043863

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THANK YOU, Tyndale, for seeing this story when it was little more than a thought; and thank you, Kathy Olson, for helping me find its soul.

Thank you, Mikey, my husband and truly best-ever friend, for knowing when to give me space, when to hold me close, and when to quietly slide Twizzlers under the door.

Thank you, ALL of my writing friends, who encourage me every day and make me so glad I obeyed the calling God put in my heart. I love to see your victories.

And above all, I thank God for the gift of salvation and the strength I have in Christ. I could not write about grace if I didn't live it every single day.

For from his fullness we have all received,
grace upon grace. (JOHN 1:16)



PART I

*Call now, if there be any that will answer thee. . . .
Although affliction cometh not forth of the dust,
neither doth trouble spring out of the ground;
Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.
I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause:
Which doeth great things and unsearchable;
Marvellous things without number:
Who giveth rain upon the earth,
and sendeth waters upon the fields:
To set up on high those that be low;
that those which mourn may be exalted to safety.*

JOB 5:1, 6-11

 CHAPTER 1 

THE BATHWATER WAS HOT when I first got in. Hot enough to steam the mirror and turn my skin an angry red, with white finger-shaped dots where I poked it. Punishing hot, Ma would have said, and that first sting getting in felt a lot like the touch of Pa's belt against my legs when I was little. But soon enough the water cools itself to comfortable. I wring out the washcloth and hold it aloft, letting most of the heat evaporate before pressing it against my face. I let my hair go damp with steam, debating whether I should dunk under to wet it enough for a good shampoo. It's Wednesday night, though, and I'm going to Rosalie's to get a new set on Friday, so I give it a run-through with my fingers and settle back with my neck on the porcelain rim.

The faucet lets in one fresh drop after another, and I count them. *Just ten more, and I'll get out.* But I lose track, drift off into pressing thoughts somewhere around number seven, and have to start all over again. Although, on this night, there's nothing to lure me out of the water.

Ariel, my little girl, four years old, is in her room, deep in sleep. My husband, Russ, and the oldest, Ronnie, are at the church. Wednesday night prayer meeting, which seems to be running later than usual. And I, given the rare opportunity of an empty house and unclaimed bathroom, let myself soak in the water, the only light streaming in from our bedroom across the hall. I'd tuned the radio away from the midweek gospel hour, and turned up the volume loud enough that I can hear strains of Louis Armstrong, but not so loud as to wake the child. I hum along, singing when I can, my lips skimming the top of the bathwater, making bubbles with the lyrics.

The end to my peace comes with the open and slam of the back kitchen door, and Russ calling my name as if I'd been in danger of being sucked behind the baseboards.

"In here," I holler, trying not to sound too disappointed at his arrival.

The bathroom door opens a few inches, and Russ peeks his head through, averting his eyes to ask if I'm decent. Or, he qualifies, as decent as a woman who skipped out on prayer meeting could be.

"Your daughter was sick," I say in mock defensiveness.

"She seems fine now," Russ says. "Sleeping well."

"I gave her an aspirin, and then she needed to rest."

He turns to look at me, his grin accepting my explanation. I sink down into the water, shooing him away while I finish washing up.

"Ronnie needs to go."

"He's a boy," I say, lathering up the washcloth. "He can go outside. Then put him to bed and tell him I'll be in to kiss him good night in a bit."

Russ leans against the doorjamb, then rises up on his toes to get a peek inside the tub. "You gonna have a kiss for me, too?"

I fold my arms, hiding myself against the tub's wall. "Put away the supper dishes and set out his school clothes, and I just might."

He considers it for a tick before grinning and backing away. Soon the radio is silenced, and instead I hear the clatter of dishes accompanied by Russ's rich tenor singing "Jesus Is All the World to Me." When he draws

out the long notes, I hear Ronnie laugh, and I know they're cutting up in the kitchen, the way they do when they're alone. Both of them too much a man to let on they can be silly.

By now the water is this close to cold, and I stand up, surprised as always at the displacement. There seems so little left in the tub, not nearly enough to have covered me, and I wonder if I haven't soaked it all up, straight into my skin. The towel is scratchy from years of rough washing and wind-whipped sun, but it feels pleasantly warm wrapped around my body, and I tread carefully across the tile floor to the mirror above the sink, where I wipe the last of the steam away and lean in close for a look.

My hair is dark now, but when it dries, the color will be on the lighter side of brown, and will frame my face in limp, soft waves. They'd been such a surprise the first time I cut it short, right before my high school portrait. I remember telling Pa I didn't want to look like a Chickasaw princess in the Troubadour yearbook, not caring how such a remark might be taken for an insult to my mother and her own. But Ma was long dead by then, and the sharpness of my cheekbones keeps her heritage fiercely alive.

Hearing Russ and Ronnie still occupied in the kitchen, I step across the hall to our bedroom and go to the dressing table, where my modest array of cosmetics waits. Nothing much, as Russ wouldn't have me paint my face, but I do have a new set of Avon just delivered. Ariel, my favorite scent for as long as I can remember, so much a part of me that my daughter wears its name. I dab a drop of perfume at the base of my neck and behind each knee, like I read in a magazine to do. Then, my skin now dry, I dust the fat, powdered puff across my shoulders. Drop the towel and dust more before sliding a clean cotton gown over my shoulders in time to hear Russ's voice leading Ronnie into his room.

Leaning my ear against the wall, I listen to the muffled sound of my son's prayer, knowing in my heart he lifts up me and Russ, and his baby sister, and Paw-Paw's farm, and all the people needing work and money. I owe him a kiss and want to be there for the *Amen*, as I am every night,

so I quickly move next door, stopping short at the sight of Russ kneeling at the bedside, his elbows on the well-worn quilt.

“And help our family be a good friend to Mr. Brace,” Ronnie prays. “And heal his arm in heaven. Amen.”

“Amen,” Russ and I echo, though my agreement is more than tinged with curiosity. I cross the room and bend low over the boy’s head, smoothing back the unruly curls that are so much like his father’s. Even in the dim light, I can tell he’s done a poor job of washing his face.

“Who’s Mr. Brace?” Our town, Featherling, is small, and the church even smaller, so to hear an unfamiliar name is rare indeed.

“Papa’s friend from before the war.” He speaks this last word with a yawn so broad I know he hasn’t cleaned his teeth, either.

I look over my shoulder at Russ.

“Just came to town,” he says. “You don’t know him.”

“He’s comin’ for dinner soon, though,” Ronnie says.

“Is he?” My words are meant for Ronnie, but I keep my eyes trained on Russ. “I guess we’ll talk more about that later.”

I kiss Ronnie’s cheek, and when I straighten myself, Russ brushes his hand across my back and settles right in the small of it, turning me to the open door. The boy mutters a final good night, but I expect he is sleeping before we leave the room. At twelve years old, he so often seems to teeter on the edge of being a man that I treasure the times when the activity of the day catches up and turns him into my sleepy boy again.

Together we walk to Ariel’s room, which is nothing more than a partitioned-off section of Ronnie’s. It isn’t much bigger than a closet and we can’t both stand in it without touching. Our girl sleeps soundly, her red hair a sea around her, and I lay the back of my fingers against her pale cheek.

“No fever?” Russ asks, his voice shy of serious.

“I’m telling you, she felt warm at supper.”

She takes a deep, startling breath right then, and we back away, hushing each other lest she wake.

Russ reaches for the switch to turn off the hallway light, and soon our

entire home plunges into near darkness, saved only by the lamp burning on my dressing table. He walks me to our bedroom door and takes me in his arms, like we are coming back from a date, and don't have two children sleeping not much more than an arm's length away. His kiss is like that, too. One of those kisses that comes along every so often in a marriage, like scales have fallen away from our very lips, and we're seeing each other for the first time in new love.

I break away—"Russ—" wanting to say that he hasn't even taken his boots off. That we haven't checked to make sure the doors are locked, or that the milk bottles are out, or that—

"You feel beautiful—"

My bare feet touch the braided rug that runs along the side of our bed, and soon the springs creak below our weight.

"Russ." I speak his name, stalling. Calculating as I always do. I brace my hands against his chest. "It's not a good night."

He nudges the strap of the nightgown off my shoulder. "Feels good enough to me."

"You know what I mean." I push him away. "Unless you've got it in your mind you want another baby."

He stops, sighs, and rolls away. Sitting up, he removes his boots, tossing them into the large wicker basket in the corner of the room.

"Honey, I'm sorry." I reach for him, but only manage to pinch my fingertips around the fabric of his sleeve as he stands, bringing the creaking once again. "A few more nights, maybe? It'll be safer."

He shrugs out of his suspenders, strips off his shirt, and lets it fall to the ground. I bite my lip to stop myself from telling him to pick it up and take it across the hall to the hamper.

"Funny." He sends a smile sure to devastate my resolve. "I don't remember you always being so careful."

"And it's a good thing, too. Else you might never have married me, Pa's shotgun or not."

"I never had a chance from the first I saw you. Not my fault you look every bit as lovely tonight."

I scuttle up against the pillows and indulge myself in watching him. Russ Merrill is tall—taller than me, which was a rarity among my suitors. His shoulders are broad, his body imposing. A gentle giant of a man, with a head full of close-cropped curls, a wide, handsome face, and a voice that resonates with the kindness of his person. As a pastor, he is beloved by men for his overt masculinity, and by women for the undeniable gentle spirit beneath. I, too, love him for both these qualities, knowing the pinnacle and depth of each.

“Guess I need to send you off to church alone more often, if this is the treatment I’ll get when you come home. I’m thinking Ronnie might be coming down with a case of sniffles. Should be full-blown Sunday morning.”

With a quick flash of a wicked grin, he scoops up his shirt and takes himself off across the hall. I hear the water running for his washup and use that time to get up from the bed and take another peek in the mirror above my dressing table. The soft light makes his words true enough, though it helps that I rub my Pond’s in faithfully each night. It is the best I can do against the Oklahoma wind and sun. Lately, too, the dust has been so bad, with great dark storms rising up from the earth, though we’ve had a spell of sweet, clear days. Maybe that’s what has Russ in such a mood.

The water turns off, and I move quickly to the bed, easing in to keep it quiet, and bring the cover up around me. Turns out I didn’t need to rush, as I hear his steps take him into the kitchen, the rattle of the milk bottles, the closing and locking of the back door.

“Checked the kids one last time,” he says, walking into the room. “Sound asleep, both of them.”

He wears blue striped pajama trousers and a clean undershirt, and I have a moment of doubt in my calculations. If I get up now, I might have enough time to run across the hall and come back, better prepared. But he climbs in beside me, the weight of him tipping me toward the center of the mattress, and folds his hands behind his head on the pillow. I’m held, even if he’s not touching me at all.

“Peaceful end to a beautiful day,” I say. And it has been, clear and cloudless, the perfect kind of warm, and not a bit of wind. More than that, not a bit of dust, which means the windows are open, letting the cool night air seep through the curtains. The room feels fresh and alive, and a glance down at Russ’s face tells me he appreciates it too.

“Too peaceful, if you ask me.”

“How can a home be too peaceful?”

“Too quiet. What would be the harm of bringing in a bit of noise?”

“And what kind of noise would that be?” Though I know what he’s getting at.

“Maybe a little one, cooin’ in the corner.” He says it with an affected accent, as if that will speak to my rancher’s daughter’s heart.

“More like cryin’,” I say, steeling my resolve. “‘Cause he’s hungry. You taken a look at the ledger books lately? I don’t know how I’m going to feed the four of us in the next months. Let alone five.”

“We can leave those worries off for a time, don’t you think?”

He runs his knuckle, the one on his first finger, up the length of my arm, catching my heartbeat up with its travel, and that’s all it takes.



Later, after, while Russ rests in slack-jawed sleep, I climb out of bed, put on my nightgown, and creep to the bathroom for a washup before checking on the children. They, too, sleep with the peace that comes from innocence. Satisfied to be every inch alone, I make my way through the dark of the kitchen to the door that leads downstairs to the feed and hardware store below. It is ours now. My brother, Greg, and I own the property, but it’s been up to Russ and me to run it since Uncle Glen died ten years ago, and that’s just about the last time it turned a profit big enough to live on. The little it brings in supplements Russ’s church salary, and minding the store gives us all something to do during these long days of drought.

Streetlight streams through the big glass window, casting the letters

Merrill's Tools and Feed in shadow across the floor. Around a sharp corner at the bottom of the steps is a small storeroom, dwindled to empty these days, as we can barely move the inventory we have on the shelves. The storeroom has a door that opens out to a platform where the trucks backed up to unload pallets of cattle feed in the days when local farmers had the wherewithal to buy such a thing. On a hook beside it is my ratty gray cardigan sweater, a gift from my mother to my father that did nothing but baffle him from the minute she finished the last stitch.

I dig into the pocket of the sweater and find what I'm looking for—a half-crumpled pack of cigarettes and a book of matches. With deft fingers, I slip one out of the pack and another one into my pocket and strike a match against the darkness. I touch the flame to the tip of the cigarette and inhale until it glows red, then shake the match and drop it between the slats of the loading dock.

Peaceful, Russ had said. Not so peaceful, perhaps, if he finds me here, and I briefly wonder if I wouldn't have been safer staying inside the storeroom closet. But our bedroom window is on the side of the building, meaning we never have complete darkness for sleeping, but also assuring me that the smoke from my cigarette isn't going to drift in past the starched white curtains.

I take another drag, determined not to be wasteful and let the cigarette burn to nothing of its own accord. I only get one a day, and not even every day—only those nights when Russ falls asleep first. Otherwise, he is always *there*. Working in the store while I clean the house upstairs. Sitting beside me on the sofa, across from me at the table. Staring down at me from behind the pulpit while I sit with the children in the pew at church.

Another drag. I hear the burning of the paper and tobacco. Half-gone already, and I touch the one in my pocket, counting. Calculating, again, just how many are left, wondering when I'll have another perfect night like this one.

Clear and cool and clean.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?"

The voice startles me so, I fumble the cigarette before stubbing it

out on the railing and dropping the butt to the platform, using my toe to nudge it between the planks.

“Good heavens, Mrs. Brown. I didn’t expect to see you out at this hour.”

Merrilou Brown lives across the street and down the block from the store, having stubbornly refused to sell her property even as business after business built itself up on what the town council renamed Commerce Street in an effort to persuade her and her husband to move. She is a tiny woman, bespectacled and beloved. Each week, the children in Sunday school scramble to measure themselves back-to-back against her, and it is an anticipated rite of passage to be taller than Miss Merrilou. Most achieve that status before the age of twelve.

“Luther needed a walk. And at his age, who am I to say no?”

Luther is a once-white poodle, his coat a perfect match for the neat cap of curls on Mrs. Brown’s own head. The two are inseparable, more so since Mr. Brown, as massive in stature as Mrs. Brown is diminutive, has taken to passing his days listening to gospel radio and writing fiery letters to stations whose programs fail to line up with Scripture.

“It’s late, is all,” I say, tugging my sweater tightly against me. “You might feel safer walking on the lighted side of the street.”

She makes a dismissive sound. “I’ve been out and about around here before there was a street. What kind of life would it be if a person can’t take her buddy out of her own backyard? I noticed you weren’t in prayer meeting tonight. Thought you might be ill.”

“I’m fine. The baby, she was sick.”

Before she can respond, Luther takes that moment to lift his leg and do his business against the side of our building. Thankfully, I have a mask of darkness to hide my irritation.

“That’s it, then,” she says, unmistakable triumph in her voice. “Here, let me give you this.” She wears a battered sweater of her own, and fishes around in its pocket as she approaches. Even though the loading platform is less than three feet off the ground, I loom above her like a monster. The night crackles with the sound of cellophane, and I see she is holding something up to me in her tiny hand. “A peppermint. For

when you go back inside. I never developed a taste for the things myself, but I had a grandma who was never without her corncob pipe. And let me tell you, her breath . . .”

She makes a high-pitched sound that sends Luther into a frenzy as he howls to match her tone.

“Thank you.” I take it with sincere gratitude and hope the howling won’t wake Russ.

“And maybe a spritz of perfume in your hair. It’s the hair that really traps the smell.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me. And with Luther here, so long as he doesn’t learn to talk.”

I indulge her joke with a shallow laugh. “Really, it’s not so much of a secret.” Russ knows, of course. He simply doesn’t approve. And because he doesn’t approve, I think it best he doesn’t know.

“Still,” she says, “I won’t breathe a word.”

“Well, I appreciate that.” She feels more like an ally than a conspirator, and I make a grateful show of unwrapping the mint and popping it into my mouth while Luther prances an arthritic circle around her leg. “Thanks again,” I speak around the candy.

Mrs. Brown scoops Luther up, wishes me a good night, and sets off in a purposeful stride. The second cigarette lingers, forgotten, in my pocket while I suck on the candy, the taste of tobacco mixing in soothing concert with the mint, until it is dissolved to nothingness on my tongue.

Once I’m back upstairs, having stolen my way into the bathroom, I wash my hands, tap a drop of Ariel eau de toilette on my fingertips, and run them through my hair, ready to slip back into bed beside my slumbering husband, all evidence of my secret erased.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

SOME OF YOU MAY BE thinking this book is a departure from my previous works. I like to think of it more as a product of growth. I've written a lot of stories about courtship and love, and most of those stories end before the wedding. Other than the *Sister Wife* series, I haven't had a story that centered around a marriage. (And the marriage in those books is hardly a healthy, viable one!)

Many stories use the sin of adultery as an automatic end to a marriage. I wanted to show it as a storm to survive. Marriage, in both life and literature, is multidimensional. It's a road trip, with two people stuck together, even if they aren't moving in the same direction.

At the same time Nola and Russ's journey began to evolve in my imagination, a fascination with the Dust Bowl was also spinning around in my mind, given its place in history following the rich decade of the Roaring Twenties, which formed the backdrop for my last series. Then, as with all my books, I delved into the impact the environment had on women—how the inability to fulfill the traditional roles of homemaker, mother, and nurturer could destroy a woman's sense of self-worth.

That's when the two ideas clicked together. A woman who cannot appreciate her worth is easy prey for this particular sin. And the dust serves as a powerful metaphor for sin—inescapable, ever present. It is unbidden and unhidden. It is filth and thirst and drought. It is death,

and no life can flourish in the midst of it. Sin does that to a marriage—to any relationship. The dust could only be overcome by the rain, and the rain brought a promise of new life.

I also wanted to explore the idea of what it means to be a “real” Christian. We are often quick to judge someone who behaves as Nola does, concluding that the person can’t possibly be saved. But what does it mean to be a “real” Christian? It simply means believing that Jesus Christ died to save us from our sin and rose from the dead to give us new life. At the same time, our belief in Christ does not keep us from sinning—not even from engaging in fully realized, willful sin. Nola enters into the act of adultery through her own free will and through willful denial of the truth. She is drawn to it by her own desires and hides it out of a very real sense of self-preservation. (Jim isn’t to blame for Nola’s sin; he’s just an opportunist. And one who will be held accountable for his own choices, though that was outside the scope of this story.)

And once we’ve sinned, knowingly and willingly, then what? Belief in Christ does not take away our ability—or our desire—to sin, nor does it provide automatic absolution for the sins we may commit. That comes only with confession and repentance, whenever the Holy Spirit convicts us.

Nola knows this. She believes it is true (though she doesn’t always feel it). Her sin cannot negate her salvation, but like any sin, it separates her from a healthy relationship with Christ—just as it precludes a healthy relationship with her husband. For a time, at least. For a season. Her shame makes her feel unworthy to accept forgiveness from Christ or to expect forgiveness from her husband. But yes, she is a real Christian—a sinner saved by grace.

Writing this story in first person, present tense was something new for me, but it seemed the best choice. Nola is what’s known as an unreliable narrator. To put it bluntly, she’s a liar, and from page one until her confession to Russ, we can be suspicious of almost everything she says. She promises herself (and, *de facto*, the reader) that she will confess to Russ. She doesn’t. She refuses to confront her motives, and that wall

of dishonesty is what keeps her from fully embracing God's forgiveness. I wanted to write a story that lived in the intentions of the character, to show how frail and insubstantial our relationships can be without true confession and repentance. When we lie to ourselves—and God—in the moment, we believe it.

I make the point in the story that Russ loved Nola first, and that he loves her more. It's my personal philosophy that no two people can ever love each other absolutely equally. In this case, that gives me hope for them to have a happy ending—maybe not in the final pages of the book, but in the months and years to come. Russ understands forgiveness. He is spiritually healthy enough to forgive Nola, even though he's human enough to need some time before full restoration. Chances are, it will take even longer for Nola to come to the place where she fully *feels* forgiven—but not for any lack of assurance on Russ's part.

May you find the strength to believe in the love of Christ and those people he has placed in your life, even when you feel that you've done something unforgivable. As Nola learned as a child, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).