

RIVER OF ASHES by WEIS & ASTOR

Chapter One

“The scariest monsters are the ones that lurk within our souls. Edgar Allan Poe,” Beau Devereaux muttered as he read the sign on the wall in English lit. “What a load of shit.”

He turned to watch the minutes tick by on the clock. The only noise in the stuffy classroom was his teacher’s monotonous, raspy voice.

The jarring school bell circled the room, setting him free. Beau headed for the door, not taking time to put his book in his bag. He rounded a corner on his way to the gym and spotted a familiar blonde. Her hair in a messy twist and secured with a claw clip, it reflected her no-nonsense style.

“Leslie.” Beau cornered her in the hall. “How’s it going?”

Her blue eyes blazed—just what he expected.

“What do you want, Beau?”

He almost laughed. His attention settled on the notch at the base of her neck. It fluttered like a scared little butterfly.

“Can’t a guy say hi to a friend?” Beau put his arm on the wall behind her, trapping her between the lockers. “We never talk. Why is that?”

He loved watching her eyes dart about, searching for rescue, but no one would challenge him. No one ever did.

“I’m not your friend.” She shoved him back. “Go talk to Dawn.”

He curled his hand into a fist. If he couldn’t have Leslie, her twin sister was the next best thing. Or so he thought. He’d started dating Dawn to get his mind off Leslie, but it hadn’t worked. They looked alike, but Dawn wasn’t her sister. She didn’t have her sass.

That he still wanted Leslie infuriated him. Beau leaned in, letting his breath tease her cheek. The scent of her skin was like the sweet vanilla smell of fresh spring clover. “One day, I’m going to take you to The Abbey and set things right between us.”

“Is there a problem?”

An aggravated, deep voice buzzed in his ear like a gnat. Beau turned around. It was Derek Foster, her trusty watchdog. He spent way too many hours studying with the geek patrol and not enough time partying with the popular crowd.

“No problem, Foster,” Beau said. “We were just talking about next week’s chemistry test.”

A few students gathered near the lockers, watching.

Leslie edged around Beau. “You can’t even spell chemistry.”

He bristled. That smart tongue of hers begged to be tamed. “That’s

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really hostile. I'm trying here, for your sister's sake."

Derek put a protective arm around her. "C'mon, Leslie. Let's get out of here."

Before Derek pulled her away, Beau wheeled around. Running his fingers through his hair, he stuck out his elbow and landed a perfect shot right to Derek's cheek.

He stumbled back, bouncing off some girls.

"Derek!" Leslie went to his side, pushing Beau out of the way.

Holding in his satisfaction, Beau frowned. "Oh, man. I'm sorry." He put a hand on Derek's shoulder, checking the red spot on his cheek and suppressing a smug grin. "I didn't see you there."

Leslie shot him an icy glare. "You're an ass."

He gave her an innocent expression, reveling in her reaction. "I'm sorry, Leslie. I didn't mean to hit him." Beau spoke loud enough for onlookers to hear. "Stop making me out to be the bad guy. Can you give that attitude of yours a break?"

Derek took Leslie's hand. "I'm fine. It was an accident. Let it go."

Beau offered his best wholesome grin. "You should listen to your boyfriend."

"What's going on here?"

Ms. Greenbriar's screeching voice made all three of them spin around.

The middle-aged principal of St. Benedict High stood with her hands on her hips. "Mr. Devereaux?"

"Nothing, ma'am." Beau gave the principal a big smile. "Just a misunderstanding. I hit Derek with my elbow when I turned. My fault entirely."

Ms. Greenbriar shifted her beady brown eyes to Derek. "Mr. Foster, anything you want to add?"

Derek nursed his cheek. "No, ma'am. It was an accident, just like Beau said."

She tapped her heel on the tile floor, glancing from Derek to Beau. "My office, Mr. Devereaux."

Beau backed away from the lockers as his stomach tightened with anger. "Yes, ma'am."



"What an asshole!" Leslie bolted out of the double glass doors with Derek close behind. A pain shot through her when the sun highlighted the red mark covering his right cheek.

Damn Beau Devereaux.

For almost a year she'd tolerated his comments and lewd glances, but

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since she'd started dating Derek, he'd stepped up his game. "I can't believe he punched you like that."

Derek put his arm around her waist as they walked down the stone steps to the parking lot. "It was an accident."

She halted and stared at him, numb with disbelief. "You don't buy his bullshit, do you?"

"No, but what am I going to do about it? Punch him back?" Derek urged her along. "Then I would be the one in Greenbriar's office."

Students on the grassy quad sat on benches, tossed footballs, studied their laptops, and listened to music.

"Does anyone in this town stand up to him?" Leslie shook her head. "He's got everyone believing he's Mr. Perfect and I'm crazy."

Derek slipped the book bag off her shoulder to carry it. "No one thinks you're crazy, least of all me."

The simple gentlemanly gesture melted her heart. Leslie touched Derek's dimpled chin, feeling fortunate. "My hero."

"What did Beau say to you, anyway?"

She shrugged. "The usual."

Hard rock blasted from a nearby car.

Derek glanced at the source of the noise. "I don't get it. How can he date your sister and not like you at all?"

Leslie removed the claw clip and ran a hand through her shoulder-length hair. "Sometimes I think she went out with him to spite me."

"What makes you say that?"

She shrugged and fell in step beside him. "We aren't exactly the closest of sisters. It was always a competition between us when we were younger. I joined the swim team, and then Dawn joined. I wanted to be a Girl Scout, and so did she. I wanted to take riding lessons and guess who went with me. But I gave up competing with her when we got to high school." She gazed at the neatly trimmed grass beneath her feet. "Dawn never stopped. Sometimes I think that's why she became a cheerleader and started going out with Beau—to show me she could."

"I can't see her dating Devereaux to get back at you. He's the richest and most popular guy in town. Isn't he every girl's dream?"

Leslie stopped short, shuddering. "Not mine. There's something off about him."

"He's just used to getting his way. It comes from two hundred years of inbreeding. Don't all those old, rich Southern families marry their cousins? Maybe that's his problem. Too many batshit crazy relatives in his family tree."

A brisk wind stirred as they crossed the blacktop to the car she shared

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with her sister. The chill wrapped around her, seeping into her bones.

Derek nudged her. “Hey, you okay?”

She came out of her daze, shaking off the bizarre feeling. “Just really sick of Beau.”

Derek smiled, and the look in his eyes made her heart skip a beat.

“Want to sneak up to The Abbey? I could show you around. It’s pretty cool.”

She’d never been to the abandoned St. Francis Seminary College on the banks of the Bogue Falaya River but had heard stories. “Yeah, no.” She hit the remote on her keychain and unlocked the doors.

He climbed into the car. “We can skip The Abbey tour and hang out at the river.”

She put her book bag in the back seat. “I have no interest in the river. I’ve told you that.”

“No. You told me you used to go there, then stopped.”

Leslie wanted to smack him for not dropping it, but didn’t. Her life had been empty before she’d met Derek. They shared classes for almost a year before getting the nerve to talk. “Do you remember the first time you spoke to me?”

“How could I forget?” He leaned over the console. “I left class early and found Beau pinning you against a locker. Seems to be a thing with him. Anyway, you threatened to tell everyone his dick was the size of a number two pencil. I was impressed.”

She laughed as Beau’s horrified expression came back to her. “And you told him to leave me alone and then offered to buy me a soda. Never realized you were so nice.”

“Then why did it take you two months to go out with me?”

Leslie started the car. “Because I wanted to see how serious you were.”

A bit rough around the edges, with bashful glances and soulful brown eyes, Derek reminded her a little of James Dean with a dark tan—a sign of his Creole lineage. He was from what some would call “the wrong side of the tracks.”

The polar opposite of Beau Devereaux.

Leslie didn’t care where he came from or what he drove because, to her, Derek Foster was the most perfect guy in the universe. When he finally asked her out, she turned him down. She hadn’t wanted to ruin her dreams of him with the disappointment of reality. But she took a chance, and six months later, here they were.

Her stomach fluttered with one glance at him. “If I agree to go to the river, what did you want to do there?”

Derek sat back, grinning. “I’ll come up with something.”

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Chapter Two

Beau sat on a wooden bench outside Ms. Greenbriar's door in the administrative offices. Arms crossed, he tapped a finger methodically on his elbow while staring out the window. He waited, keeping a lid on his rising anxiety.

Students rushed past the window to the principal's office, but their occasional stares didn't bother him. His mind was on getting to practice. Coach Brewer hated when players were late, and Beau made a point never to show a lack of discipline. Next to his father, Coach Brewer was the only man whose anger he never wanted to incur.

"Beau," *Madbriar* called from her office.

He stood from the bench and put on his best smile. *This will be fun.*

The room was jam-packed with bookcases, a small desk, and an outdated computer.

"Tell me what happened with Leslie Moore and Derek Foster," the principal asserted.

"I was speaking to Leslie when Derek came up. I accidentally hit him with my elbow when I turned around." He cleared his throat and looked at the floor. "I completely understand if you want to punish me for hitting Derek."

Madbriar took a seat behind the desk, her chair squeaking in protest. "Relax, Beau. You're an exemplary student and an upstanding member of this community. No one is questioning your behavior." She sat back and stared at him for a moment. "Ask your dad to give me a call when he can to discuss the new gym addition. I want to see whether Benedict Brewery will donate for the school fundraiser."

Beau folded his hands, keeping the tips of his index fingers together, a thrill of amusement running through him. Everyone always wanted something from him or his family. Being the town's biggest employer made donating to every fundraiser in St. Benedict obligatory. He sometimes wondered how his father put up with all the bloodsuckers.

"Sure. I'll let him know, but he's always happy to help."

She pointed at the office door. "Now, you'd better get to practice."

His tension eased, Beau stood. He wanted to pat himself on the back for an impeccable performance. "Thanks, Ms. Greenbriar."

"And Beau, do yourself a favor."

He gripped the door handle. "Ma'am?"

"Stay away from Leslie Moore." She picked up an open folder. "That girl will be nothing but trouble for you."

He nodded, then hurried from her office, chuckling.

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Trouble is my middle name.



The smell of sweat and freshly cut grass greeted Beau as he strutted onto the practice field. He tightened his grip on his helmet. The team was already in the middle of their stretches. He was late.

His belly flopping over the waistband of his gym shorts, Coach Brewer walked between rows of guys, blowing his whistle to keep time with their exercises. One among the team struggled to keep up. Jenson Theriot.

The bungling offensive tackle annoyed the shit out of Beau. He'd missed several blocks, leaving Beau vulnerable in the pocket. The freckle-faced redhead had become a detriment to his team—something Beau couldn't tolerate.

Beau's attention drifted to the metal bleachers and the cheerleading squad working on their routine. Dawn was there wearing a short, white cheerleading uniform. He loved how the bright red St. Benedict dragon, its mouth open and teeth bared, hugged her breasts. The other girls on the squad, whose names eluded him, shouted their silly rhymes for victory and team spirit as Dawn watched them kick, split, and jump.

Dawn turned to the field and, spotting him, waved.

The wind whipped her long blonde ponytail and brushed several strands over her shoulder, making it appear shorter, like Leslie's. Though they were physically identical in every way except for their hair length, Beau wished Dawn was the smart-mouthed bitch he really wanted.

Before he could get away, she came running to greet him. It was the last thing he needed. Coach Brewer would be pissed.

"Hey, honey." Dawn frowned at him. "Everything okay? I heard Madbriar called you into her office."

Her voice wasn't Leslie's. He'd memorized the smoky, sexy sound of her sister. The way she raised her tone ever so slightly when she was about to say something sarcastic. Dawn had none of Leslie's nuances—her voice was utterly lifeless.

Dawn worked hard to portray a wholesome image by avoiding cursing and smoking, which he admired. But her love of cherry-red lipstick and excessive mascara aggravated him. He'd told her more than once not to wear so much, but she didn't listen. She just put on more, thinking he liked it. Beau longed to wipe the color from her mouth.

He gave her a warm smile, hiding his thoughts. "She wanted to talk to me about my father contributing to the gym fundraiser." He looked over at his teammates.

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“I heard it was because you were giving Derek and my sister a hard time.”

His head snapped back around to her. How dare she contradict him. “No way, baby.” He laced his voice with extra charm to sound convincing. “Why would I waste my time on them when I’d rather spend every moment with you.”

She squealed.

Putty in his hands, Dawn melted against him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I knew it wasn’t true,” she whispered.

He smelled her skin. It wasn’t there—the heady aroma of clover always lingering on Leslie. Another difference between them, but one he was sure only he noticed.

“Beau, get your ass over here,” Coach Brewer yelled.

“Gotta go.” He unwound her arms. “See you after practice.”

“I love you,” Dawn managed to get out before he walked away.

He pretended not to hear her while putting on his helmet. Love wasn’t what he was after.



A load lifted from Leslie’s shoulders the moment the red-brick walls of St. Benedict High were behind her. The months of putting up with Beau had taken their toll, making the school almost feel like a prison. She relaxed her hands on the steering wheel. The cool afternoon breeze ran through her hair as she drove toward Main Street, where rustic storefronts sat between modern buildings. The hodgepodge of styles reminded her of the people in town. An interesting blend of old families who had lived in St. Benedict for several generations, and new families running away from the urban sprawl taking over nearby cities.

Derek touched her knee. “Why don’t you like going to the river?”

Leslie glanced at a thick swath of honeysuckle vines on the side of the road, her unease returning.

“All you ever said was you went to the river with Dawn junior year, ran into Beau and his friends, and swore you’d never go back.”

“Dawn and I got invited to the river by some seniors. Being asked to party on the river at night was a big deal to me.” Leslie’s shoulders drooped. “Beau started out talking to me, and I knew he was interested, but Dawn didn’t like that. So, when I went to grab something to drink, she stepped in and hit on him. They hooked up and disappeared. I got stuck fighting off his football buddies, who wanted to show me a good time.”

Derek scowled. “What did you do?”

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Leslie raised her nose in the air. “I started spouting feminist literature, and they ran for the hills.”

“That must have been scary.”

“It was.” Her voice cracked. “When three guys manhandle you, it’s terrifying. I didn’t have my car, so I walked back to town.”

“At night?” His voice rose.

She took in the sunlight skipping across the tops of the buildings. The smell of hamburgers from Mo’s Diner filtered through the car. “Staying at the party was dangerous. A virgin hanging around a bunch of drunk and horny football players would only end badly.”

Derek moved closer. “I don’t want you in that situation again. The only guy I want around you is me.”

Leslie noticed a hint of possessiveness in his tone. “But you never try anything with me when you’re drunk. Or any other time.”

He sat back. “I will when you’re ready.”

Near the edge of town, tall oak trees covered with Spanish moss replaced the buildings. A gentle breeze ruffled through their leaves. Leslie turned onto Devereaux Road and headed toward the remains of St. Francis Seminary.

Derek put his hand on her knee, then slowly rubbed up her leg. A warm tingle spread between her thighs.

“I want your first time to be special.” He bobbed his eyebrows. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t fool around at The Abbey.”

She let her foot off the gas, slowing as the road narrowed, her sense of dread returning. “Are you sure you want to go?”

Derek flashed a boyish grin. “Hell yeah.”

The spires of The Abbey appeared as the car cruised along. The ruins of the towering white marble and brick structure rose behind the trees. Leslie slammed on the brakes, not wanting to go any farther.

Derek leaned toward her. “Is something wrong?”

Tearing her gaze away from the macabre structure, she sought refuge in his eyes, and the feeling passed.

“Can we skip the tour of The Abbey? I don’t think I’m in the mood.”

He lightly kissed her lips. “We can do whatever you want.”

Chapter Three

Leslie drove down a tree-lined street of tired old homes with peeling paint, sagging porches, and varying degrees of disrepair. It saddened her to see the residences crying for attention. One of the older neighborhoods in St. Benedict, the atmosphere reflected the work-weary attitude of the people

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struggling to hold on to their dreams.

She pulled into the cracked driveway of a yellow wooden house. With a rusted tin roof, broken white picket fence, and bent mailbox, the residence mirrored others on the street. Despite its unsettling appearance, the home contained happy memories.

She shut off the engine. "Is your mom still working doubles at the diner?"

Derek shoved open his door. "Yes. Thank goodness."

Leslie got out of the car, astounded by his comment. "What makes you say that?"

He pointed to the bruise on his cheek. "You know how she feels about fighting. I hope she doesn't kill me when she sees my face."

The chug of an approaching engine caught their attention. A blue pickup truck, with a bent front fender and cracked windshield, pulled in beside them.

Leslie blocked the sun with her hand, a sinking feeling settling over her. "I guess you're going to find out real fast."

"Thought I might beat you home." A waiflike brunette with naturally tanned Creole skin stepped out of the truck.

Her beige polyester waitress dress made Carol Foster look older than her forty-two years. It stressed the crow's feet and circles rimming her eyes. But Leslie still saw some of the pretty woman her father once told her about.

Derek helped his mother unload groceries from the truck. "What are you doing home early, Mom?"

"I got the afternoon off." Carol nodded to Leslie. "How have you been, dear?"

Leslie went to Derek's side, nervous. "I'm good, Mrs. Foster."

"I told you to call me Carol, sweetie. No need for all the—" She homed in on her son's cheek. "What happened to your face?"

Derek walked toward the porch steps, ignoring his mother's reaction. "It's nothing."

"Nothing, my butt." Carol grabbed his chin to get a closer look. "Who did this?"

He stepped back. "It was an accident. I ran into Beau's elbow."

Carol's cheeks paled. "Gage Devereaux's son? Why were you fighting with him?"

"I wasn't fighting. He turned around and struck me with his elbow in the hall. No big deal."

The anguish in Derek's voice frustrated Leslie.

"Were you there?" Carol demanded.

Leslie twisted her fingers as her guilt intensified. "He was coming to my rescue."

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“Your rescue?” Carol marched toward the porch. “What did Beau do to you?”

Derek waited for Leslie to climb the steps before following with the groceries. “He’s been bothering Leslie in the hall a lot lately.”

Carol’s green eyes widened, and she looked at Leslie. “Why would Beau pick on you?”

“Because he hates me.” Thinking of Beau made Leslie queasy. “He has ever since the night he got with my sister. He keeps telling everyone he wants to be friends, but I don’t buy it. The way he looks at me, the things he says ... He doesn’t want to be friends, not by a long shot.”

Carol yanked her keys from her handbag. “Sounds like you need to steer clear of him.” She unlocked the front door and pressed her shoulder against the warped wood, shoving hard to get the door to budge. “I’ve been meaning to fix this.”

A single mother working twelve hours a day deserved a break, but Leslie didn’t know how to help Derek or his mother. Getting ahead in St. Benedict took more than a strong work ethic, it took the good graces of the town patriarch, Gage Devereaux.

Leslie followed Carol inside. The sparsely furnished living room had a small worn sofa, a wobbly oak coffee table, and an old oval rug covering the dull hardwood floors. The only new item was the flat-screen TV mounted on the wall above the dusty mantle.

“I haven’t cleaned.” Carol ran her hand over her forehead, hiding her worry lines. “But you’ve seen the place messier than this.”

Leslie put on a reassuring smile, her heart aching for the woman. “You should see my room. My mom’s always complaining about it.”

Carol set her five-gallon purse on a rickety, round table next to the kitchen. “What about your sister? Do you two share your propensity for messy rooms?”

Leslie shook her head as she considered her sister’s OCD-like ways. “No. Dawn is the perfect one. Her room is always spotless.”

Derek carried the groceries to the kitchen counter. “But her personal life’s a mess.”

“That’s not a kind thing to say.” Carol slapped her son’s shoulder, frowning at him.

“Why not?” Derek tossed his book bag down. “She’s dating Beau Devereaux and thinks he can do no wrong. She’s seen him bullying Leslie and blames her for it. What else do you need to know?”

“You don’t know that.” Her lips set in a firm line, Carol went to the kitchen and flipped on the lights. “Right now, Dawn’s wrapped up in having the attention of a guy she thinks is the catch of St. Benedict. Dating the

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football star and heir to the Devereaux fortune seems like a dream come true. She's probably afraid to ruffle Beau's feathers and risk losing him."

Leslie arched an eyebrow. "You seem to know an awful lot about what Dawn is feeling."

Carol lifted milk from one of the grocery bags. "I was in your sister's shoes once."

More than a little intrigued, Leslie edged closer. "You were?"

Derek put the eggs in the fridge. "Mom dated Gage Devereaux in high school. Didn't I tell you that?"

Leslie gave a wide-mouthed *no you did not* look. She faced Carol. "So, what happened?"

"There isn't much to tell," Carol muttered. "Gage and I dated for a couple of years in high school, and then he went to college in Boston."

"She met my dad after she quit college," Derek interrupted.

"Don't remind me." Carol took a ragged breath. "We weren't even married two years when your father ran off to California."

Derek's father skipping town was a sore spot, so they never talked about him. But Leslie's curiosity about Carol's past with the Devereaux family got the better of her. "Is Beau like his father?"

A slight smile added a touch of warmth to Carol's sad eyes. "I don't know Beau, but Gage was very considerate of other people. Even though he was the richest boy in town, he never acted better than anyone else. I'm going to take a shower." Carol nodded to Leslie. "Good seeing you, sweetie."

Leslie waited until Derek's mother disappeared down the narrow hall. "Did she seem upset to you?" She hooked her pinkie around his. "When I asked about Mr. Devereaux, she changed."

"Nah. She's upset about my face. I'll get an earful after you leave."

Leslie rested her head against his chest, wishing she could stay. "I should go. My mom wants me home for dinner."

She went to the freezer and found a pack of peas. Returning to his side, Leslie gently pressed the bag against his bruised cheek. "Keep this on for a while. I can't have my boyfriend walking around school looking like the other guy won."

Derek chuckled and walked her to the door. It took a stiff yank to open.

After kissing Derek goodbye, Leslie walked to her car, thinking about Carol's connection to Beau's father. There were secrets buried in their small town, especially about the Devereaux family. Hints of their past had circulated among the residents of St. Benedict for as long as she could remember. But Carol's history with Gage had not been one of those tales.

If Dawn continued dating Beau, would she end up like Derek's mother?

The chill she experienced on the road to The Abbey returned. She didn't

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know why, but the daunting thought of her sister's future made her think of those sinister spires. Unnerved by the sensation, Leslie decided to take the long way home and avoid the area altogether.

Chapter Four

The beauty of the sunlight filtering through the oaks lining Leslie's street offered a moment of distraction as she drove through her upper-middle-class neighborhood. Nestled in a quiet part of St. Benedict known as The Elms, her house wasn't far from the entrance to the lands owned by the Devereaux Estate.

Leslie pulled up to the three-car garage and cringed when she looked at the clock on the dash.

She grabbed her book bag and headed toward the back door, hoping her mom wouldn't be downstairs.

"You're late again, Leslie Elise," Shelley shouted from the kitchen.

Leslie sighed and shut the door. "Yeah. Sorry."

Her mom rounded the corner in a navy pantsuit, her wavy honey-blond hair secured at the base of her neck in a barrette.

No doubt about it. Shelley Moore could intimidate the devil himself if she wanted to.

Her mother's blue eyes sparkled with irritation. "You were with that boy again, weren't you?"

Leslie scowled. "His name is Derek, Mom. Not *that* boy. I hate when you call him that."

"And I hate when he makes you late." Shelley pointed a spatula at her daughter, her lips nothing but a thin, angry line.

Leslie followed her mother into the kitchen. She crossed the threshold, her tennis shoes squeaking on the polished brick floor. She hiked her bag onto the counter with a heavy thump. "I was only a few minutes late. It's not a big deal."

"We have rules for a reason." Her mother wielded the spatula again, pointing it at Leslie like a sword. "And you know better. Books on the floor, not the counter."

Leslie deposited her bag next to the breakfast bar. "Where's Dawn?"

"Not home from cheerleading practice yet."

Leslie gritted her teeth. "Is Beau bringing her home?"

"Of course. You know he always brings her home after practice."

Great. The princess gets driven home by her asshole boyfriend, and I get crap for spending ten extra minutes with mine.

Several choice curse words slipped from Leslie's lips.

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“What was that, young lady?”

“Nothing. Dad home yet?”

Shelley pointed her spatula at the family room next to the kitchen. “In his office. Go tell him dinner’s almost ready.”

Leslie hurried toward her father’s office. She knocked and pushed the door open. Soft overhead lights stretched across a paper-strewn desk. John Moore’s slight frown told her he wasn’t happy with what he read. A stack of manila folders lay neatly on the corner of his mahogany desk, each representing a case.

Leslie stood in the doorway and smiled. She couldn’t remember when he wasn’t working. “Hey, Dad. Whatcha working on?”

John glanced up from the file, his glasses slightly askew. He ran his hand through his hair and leaned back, resting against the leather seat. “I’m finishing up a contract for the brewery.”

Lately, he’d been working a lot for Gage Devereaux’s company. Benedict Brewery was on the verge of breaking nationally, which meant a lot of late nights.

“How was school? Did you have a good day, Leelee?”

She smiled at the nickname and walked in. She’d always been Leelee to him. “School was good.” She slumped her shoulders. “Well, not so good. Beau hit Derek.”

John set his glasses on his desk. “Is he okay?”

“Yes. Beau claims it was an accident, but Derek ended up with a bruise on his cheek.” Leslie sat on the corner of the desk. “Can you sue Beau on Derek’s behalf? For assault, or at least emotional cruelty?”

John folded his hands, a deep line creasing his brow. “You know the law. Derek must file charges or at least seek compensation. Were any charges filed?”

“No. Ms. Greenbriar took Beau to her office, but she won’t do anything.”

He tapped a finger on his blotter. “I doubt Carol Foster will pursue any legal fight with the Devereaux family.”

Leslie perked up, intrigued. “Why? Because she dated Beau’s father in high school?”

John narrowed his gaze. “Where did you hear that?”

“Mrs. Foster mentioned it. I got the impression Mr. Devereaux meant something to her.”

John picked up his glasses and focused on his paperwork. “They were very close in high school. I remember seeing them holding hands everywhere they went, but everyone knew the Devereauxs never liked Carol.”

“Why not?”

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John hesitated. “Her father was the brewery foreman at the time, and they were uncomfortable with their son dating the daughter of an employee. I’m sure they discouraged the relationship.”

A whole new perspective on the Devereaux family popped into Leslie’s head. She’d always thought of them as pretentious, sort of like her mother, but had never considered them cruel. “Foreman, my foot. We both know the reason old man Devereaux didn’t want Gage dating Carol, and it had nothing to do with her father’s job.”

John peered over his glasses at her. “I don’t like what you’re implying.”

Leslie stood and placed her hands on her hips. “Come on, Dad. Carol is Creole. The Devereaux family has never liked anyone who doesn’t look like them. I’m sure that hasn’t changed.”

John smiled. “No, dear. Things are different now.”

“Are they? Mom wants me to stay away from Derek because she’s a snob and doesn’t think he’s good enough for me.”

“I heard that.” Shelley barged into the room. “Just because I don’t like your boyfriend, young lady, does not make me a snob.”

Leslie faced her mother and squared her shoulders. “Then what justification do you have for the demeaning remarks directed at Derek?”

Shelley glared at John. “You see what your influence has done? Now she’s even talking like a lawyer.”

He held up his hands. “Don’t drag me into the middle of this. It’s your argument, not mine.”

Shelley folded her arms, smirking exactly like Dawn. “After raising twin girls, I’m better at winning arguments than you’ll ever be.”

John scanned the paperwork on his desk. “I have no doubt about that.”

“Ah, hello!” Leslie waved her hand. “I’m still waiting for my question to be answered.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Shelley stormed toward the office door. “Get ready for dinner,” she announced before leaving.

“Why does she always do that?” Frustrated, Leslie folded her arms. “I ask a question, and she totally ignores me. But Little Miss Perfect can ask about the weather in Cleveland and Mom will give her a three-page report, complete with pie charts and a website.”

“Leelee.” John’s voice softened as he rose from his chair. “Don’t you think you’re exaggerating?”

“No, I’m not. She hates Derek just because he’s not all rich and popular like Beau. But she won’t even get to know him. She never lets him come over or bothers to talk to his mom. And whenever I want to go out with him, I have to give her an itinerary, ten personal contacts, and a freakin’ urine sample.”

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John chuckled. “Your mother has her faults, but she isn’t that bad.”

“Then why does Miss Goody Two-Shoes get to go everywhere with Beau while I face an interrogation just to get pizza with Derek?”

“Because your mother knows Beau. Knows his family. And she trusts him.” He held up his hands before she could argue. “People see him as an upstanding kid.”

Leslie’s hopes of ever getting her mother’s approval for Derek sank like a stone in a shallow pond. “What about Derek? What can I do to make her see what a good guy he is?”

“I’m sure she’ll come around. You know how resistant she is to change, just like your sister.” He patted her shoulder. “Give your mom some time.”

Dawn bounded into the room. “Daddy, I can’t wait to tell you what happened to me at school today.”

“Aaaaand I’m outta here.” Leslie headed for the door.

Dawn frowned at her sister. “What’s up your butt?”

Leslie spun around and a pang of heartache struck her. They looked so alike yet were so different. She didn’t even know Dawn anymore. Beau had driven a wedge between them as wide as the Grand Canyon. Why bother telling her what Beau had done? She wouldn’t believe her.

“Nothing’s up my butt.”

Dawn scrunched her face. “Is this about Beau and Derek getting into it today? Just so you know, my boyfriend told me what happened. You were flirting with him in the hall. Derek got jealous and accidentally walked into Beau’s elbow.”

Leslie’s cheeks burned. “You little toad! Why in the hell would I want a scumbag like Beau when I’ve got Derek?”

“Girls,” John said.

Dawn charged her sister. “You’re kidding, right? Beau is so much more than the loser you’re dating.”

John’s voice rose higher. “Girls!”

“Derek’s not a loser!” Leslie got in Dawn’s face. “He has a better GPA than your Neanderthal.”

“What’s going on in here?” Shelley burst back into the room.

Dawn pointed at Leslie. “She called my boyfriend a Neander ... something.”

Leslie crossed her arms. “Neanderthal, you idiot.”

Shelley stepped between the girls. “Enough. There will be no name-calling in this house.”

Leslie scoffed. “What about Derek? I can’t call Beau names, but she can make fun of my boyfriend? That’s not fair.”

“She has a point, hon.” John eyed Shelley.

River of Ashes

“You’re not helping,” Shelley grumbled. “Leslie, you could learn from your sister’s example. Dawn has a future with Beau. What do you have with that *boy*?”

Gutted, Leslie trudged to the door. She stopped and glanced back at her mother. “You’re unbelievable.”

Would it even matter if her mom knew all the horrid things Beau had said to her? Or the torment she’d suffered for months? No. Her mother would twist it and blame her. So, she would keep her mouth shut.

“Where are you going?” Shelley demanded. “We’re about to eat dinner.”

“I’ve lost my appetite.” Leslie hurried away, impatient for the sanctuary of her bedroom.

Chapter Five

Beau strolled down the curved mahogany staircase. He stepped onto the hardwood floor and caressed the newel post shaped like a horse’s head at the bottom of the stairs. He admired the taut bit in its mouth and the pain carved into the creature’s bulging eyes.

He headed along the hallway, tugging his book bag over his shoulder, the occasional moan of the floorboards echoing around him. He glanced at a massive gold painting of New Orleans, bought by some dead relative a century ago. Family portraits of deceased members of the Devereaux clan littered the white wainscoting-covered walls. He passed the tall cypress door to his father’s office, not bothering to check inside. His father was an early riser and probably on his way to the brewery.

At the end of the hall, he turned down a slender corridor to the kitchen and the entrance to the five-car garage. He enjoyed the quiet after his father went to work and before his mother crawled out of bed. It made him feel like everything was all his—for a little while, anyway.

Beau eased around the hammered copper breakfast bar to the refrigerator in the kitchen. When he turned around, Beau froze, afraid to move.

Gage held a coffee mug as he leaned against the black granite countertop. Wearing a long-sleeved shirt and slacks, he came across as more casual than the ruthless capitalist he was. Beau had nothing in common with his father except their height and physical prowess.

He attempted to appear relaxed by shifting his book bag on his shoulder. “Why are you still home?”

Gage inspected Beau and then set his coffee on the counter. “I wanted to speak to you before you left for school.”

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The condescending tone in his father's voice tightened his chest. It usually signaled a lecture.

"I got a call from Ms. Greenbriar. She said you had a run-in with Carol Foster's boy."

Beau's fingers twitched. Great. The idiot woman had called his father. The last thing he needed was Gage Devereaux up his ass.

"Derek is dating Dawn's sister. I often see him at school." He tempered the irritation in his voice, not wanting to annoy his father. "Leslie and I were talking, and Derek joined us. I accidentally tapped him with my elbow when I turned to leave. I apologized. Everything is fine."

He waited, analyzing his father's every move.

"I've spoken to you before about this." Gage moved closer. "This family is under scrutiny right now. I don't want your actions threatening our business or our name." He gripped Beau's shoulder. "What have I always told you? What is our rule?"

Beau faced his father, standing at attention. "Self-control in all things. Never let anyone see who you really are."

Gage leaned closer. "No matter what anyone says, no matter what they do, you walk away. This includes your girlfriend. Do you understand?"

Beau stiffened at the low, menacing tone in his father's voice. "Yes, sir."

Gage nodded. "Go to school."

Beau stood by the breakfast bar, not moving a muscle as his father headed to the garage. After the door clicked shut, a trickle of sweat ran down his temple. His jaw cramped from clenching. Gage's words spinning in his head, Beau slammed his hand down on the copper bar.

Anger like molten lead ran through him. Beau sucked in deep breaths to calm down—something he remembered from a long-ago therapy session. Then he relaxed his hand on the bar, checking the dent he'd left in the copper. He wiped the smudge away, stepped back, and raised his head.

I am the master of control.



Low clouds heavy with rain hugged the sky above the student parking lot. Beau drove his silver BMW onto the blacktop and found his usual spot beneath a shady oak.

Students milled around, chatting and laughing. Guys from the team tossed a football over the tops of cars. It was a relaxed atmosphere, just what he needed to dispel the last remnants of his father's warning.

A football dropped a short distance from his door, and a red-faced Jenson Theriot ran after it. He kicked the ball along the blacktop, failing to

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retrieve it. Some guys laughed nearby.

Beau glared at the redheaded dweeb.

Jenny, your days are numbered.

The awkward teen finally got hold of the ball, and when he raised his head, he spotted Beau sitting in his car.

He offered the junior a smirk. Beau swore the clumsy idiot damn near shit his pants. Jenson took off at a breakneck speed he'd never shown on the football field, heading for the safety of the quad.

Leslie and Dawn pulled into the parking lot, and Beau's grin widened. Leslie was driving, as usual.

Dawn was out of the car as soon as it stopped. He waited until she got to the main entrance before opening his door.

Leslie took her time gathering her things, and he studied her movements. She kept pushing a stray hair behind her ear.

She's nervous. Could I be getting to her?

Beau enjoyed seeing her this way. It made him feel as if he had some mastery over her. He stayed back as Leslie walked toward the side entrance with her head down, clutching the book bag to her chest.

Here was his chance.

He jogged across the green quad as a clap of thunder shook the sky. Leslie stopped at the door, searching through her bag, giving him enough time to reach her.

She had left her hair down, just touching her slim shoulders, and her light blue blouse emphasized the paleness of her skin.

She turned to head back to the parking lot and ran smack into him.

He gripped her arm to keep her from falling, enjoying the opportunity to touch her soft skin. "Whoa, hey there." He kept his voice deep and seductive. "Just the girl I've been waiting for."

Her full, unpainted lips turned downward. Beau pulled her close and Leslie jerked her arm, trying to break free. He dug his fingers into her flesh, loving the fight in her. It made him feel alive.

"What's wrong, darlin'?"

"You're an asshole, Beau. You know that?"

A group of girls rounded the corner, and Beau let her go. He gave them a dazzling smile as they passed by. They giggled and quickly slipped in the side entrance.

Leslie pushed past him, but he placed his hand on the side of the building, blocking her.

He leaned forward, taking in her sweet scent. "Something wrong?"

She arched away from him. "Leave me alone."

"Why? What did I do?" He gazed up and down her body, lingering on

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her breasts.

Leslie glared at him, her blue eyes on fire. But before she could respond, Dawn ran up and got between them.

“Back off, Leslie.”

Her threatening tone surprised Beau. *Where had she been hiding that?* Beau slipped his arm around Dawn’s waist. “You need to set your sister straight, baby. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she’s mad at me about something.”

Leslie pointed her finger at him. “Stay away from me and Derek.”

“You need to check your facts, counselor. I don’t give a rat’s ass about your geek boyfriend.” He flashed a brilliant smile, the one he used to get out of trouble.

Dawn curled into his chest, her strong perfume stinging his eyes.

“See? He doesn’t give a rat’s hiney about Derek. So just drop it.”

Beau hated the childish approach Dawn used with her sister, but it proved he had nothing to worry about when it came to her loyalties. That was good. The bigger the divide between them, the closer he could get to Leslie.

Beau took Dawn’s book bag from her shoulder. “We on for the river Friday night?”

Leslie rolled her eyes. “All everybody does there is drink and screw.”

“You have the wrong idea about what goes on at the river.” Beau dug his nails into the strap of Dawn’s bag. “We just hang out and have fun. No parents to annoy us, no rules to follow. We can do what we want.” He rolled his neck, relieving the tension. “You would enjoy yourself.”

“No thanks.”

Dawn smirked at her. “Leslie’s creeped out by The Abbey. She never wants to go to the river because of it and doesn’t even like talking about the place.”

With her wide stance and tightly pressed lips, Leslie reminded Beau of an MMA fighter. Dawn had hit a nerve, and he could guess why. He sensed an opportunity. His heart sped up at the prospect of adding to her fears. “Are you talking about the ghost?”

Dawn snickered, grating on his nerves. “What ghost?”

Beau kept his attention focused on Leslie while he spoke, hoping to see her terrified expression. “The lady in white. She wears a white-hooded cloak and haunts The Abbey grounds. Some say she appears when something bad is gonna happen, but others think she’s the lost love of a monk who lived at the seminary. You gotta be careful at The Abbey.”

Thunder rolled across the sky, and both girls flinched. He couldn’t have asked for better timing, but their frightened reactions fascinated him. If only he could recreate the fear in their faces—what a turn-on.

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Dawn was the first to break the spell, slapping his arm and giggling. “Beau. Cut it out.” She took his hand and pulled him toward the door. “Let’s go to class.”

He let Dawn lead him away, but not before glancing back at the sister he wanted to possess.



Leslie stared as her sister and Beau walked down the hall holding hands. She hated seeing Dawn manipulated by the sadistic ass.

Lightning streaked overhead as she went inside, spooked by the weather and Beau’s eerie story. Leslie had watched his expression as he told the tale about the ghost. He’d almost seemed to enjoy her uneasiness. But why?

Inside, students casually strolled through the gray locker-filled hallway, chatting and checking their phones. Leslie’s cell buzzed in her back pocket. She walked as she read the text.

Derek: Running late, love

Warmth chased away the anxiety Beau had caused. Since dating Derek, Beau’s choking effect on her had lessened. Having Derek to talk to and share concerns with helped tremendously.

Once past the chemistry lab, the students in the hall thinned. Before she went to her first period class, she sent off a quick text to Derek.

Someone grabbed her from behind, and Leslie dropped her phone. She cocked her arm back to confront Beau with a quick punch to the throat and spun around.

Derek held up his hands, eyeing her tight fist. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Leslie sucked in a deep breath and relaxed. “I thought you were someone else.”

He picked up her phone. “Who else would grab you in the middle of the hallway?”

Leslie took her phone, debating what to say. She didn’t want to tell Derek how shaken she was. It would only make him go after Beau, and that was the last thing she wanted.

“Nobody. I ran into Beau earlier.” She touched the bruise on his cheek, glad it had not turned black and ugly. “It’s looking better.”

“Never mind about that.” Derek took her hand. “What happened with Beau?”

The tension in his voice made up her mind. She couldn’t share her fears with him or anyone. She had to keep Derek safe, no matter how much it killed her to remain silent.

“Nothing. His usual crap. I can handle him.”

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“That guy has some sick obsession with you.”

She waved off Derek’s concern. “He’s dating my sister, so how could he have an obsession with me?”

Derek urged her along the hall. “Who knows. Maybe he hates that you’re smart, independent, and the opposite of Dawn. Or he just has a sick fantasy of doing twins.”

She tucked her head against his chest. “Isn’t that what all guys want?”

“Guess again.” He stopped outside her class. “I’m with you, but I’d rather jump off a bridge than spend ten minutes with your sister.” He kissed her cheek just as the first bell rang.

Shouting students, lockers banging, and squeaking tennis shoes signaled the last-minute chaos before class.

Derek smiled at her before joining the mad rush for first period and disappeared into the sea of students.

Leslie’s heart fluttered as she watched him walk away.

Chapter Six

The final bell rang, and the front doors burst open. A wave of students poured out of the school. Caught up in the tide, Leslie went with the flow until they reached the bottom of the stairs, and the students spread out across the quad. The clouds had vanished, and the afternoon sun filtered down. She stepped to the side, hoping to soak up some warmth while the crowd thinned.

Behind the school was the recently renovated athletic area. New metal stands lined the oval track that encircled the turfed football field. All were generous gifts from Beau’s family during his freshman year—along with the announcer’s booth and state-of-the-art video equipment.

Leslie adjusted the weight of her books. She enjoyed going to games and watching her sister cheer, but everything changed when Beau cornered her after his first night at the river with Dawn. He confessed he’d slept with the wrong Moore twin.

“Your sister is a cheap imitation of the girl I want.”

For months, she kept quiet about his offensive comments. Dawn would never believe it after so much time, anyway, and the rest of the school viewed him as the perfect guy. What could she do?

A loud bang startled her. Guys dressed in red football jerseys and gray warm-ups rushed out of the gym. Hollering and giving each other high fives, the players jogged to the field for afternoon practice. One boy stayed at the back of the pack, carrying his helmet, his red hair reflecting the afternoon sunlight.

“Come on, Jenny,” one player yelled at the loner. “Move your ass.”

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Leslie's fury ignited. She knew what it was like to be an outsider and teased by others.

Coach Brewer, wearing his usual shorts, high tube socks, and St. Benedict Athletic Department knit shirt, trotted toward the field with a player at his side. The coach smiled and patted his shoulder.

Then she noticed the number four on the back of the jersey, Beau's number, and shuddered.

Beau's attention remained on his coach until other players came up to them. They all laughed, knocked Beau's shoulder pads, and slapped each other on the butt.

It was just another example of the Beau other people saw.

Derek walked up and wrapped his arms around her. Smelling his musky scent, Leslie tilted her head, giving him access to his favorite spot on her neck.

He nuzzled the soft hollow. "Let's get out of here."

"Great idea." Leslie threaded her fingers through his.

They crossed the grass to the parking lot and wove through the remaining cars. She hit the remote on her keys and her headlights flashed. The stress of the day evaporated when she got behind the wheel.

Once out of the parking lot, Leslie headed toward Main Street. "Did you get any applications in yet?"

"Yeah. Two." He avoided her eyes. "One from LSU and the other from USL."

She frowned. "None from out of state?"

Derek rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not sure out of state would be a good fit for me."

"But you talked about going to UT in Austin. It's your dream college."

"The out-of-state tuition is twice what staying here would be. If I'm close by, I can come home on weekends and check on Mom."

A car honked behind them, and Leslie glanced at the green light. She waved an apology and started through the intersection. "Maybe we could go to LSU. They have a great law program. We could even get a place together and save on expenses."

"No way. We're not living together until we're married. I've got my reputation to consider."

"If that's how you feel, Mr. Foster."

He playfully slapped her thigh. "If I could ever get you to The Abbey, I'll make you pay for that."

Anxiety nipped at her. She couldn't keep refusing to go to The Abbey with him. *Just suck it up.*

"All right, all right. Let's go."

River of Ashes

His face lit up. “Really?”

Leslie laughed and shook her head. “Yep, really.”

She drove past picturesque shop windows displaying everything from clothes to baked goods to art. The quaint, small-town charm was occasionally interrupted by modern, sprawling structures, such as the new drugstore and big chain grocery.

She turned off Main and headed along the single-lane road. The storefronts gave way to homes with colorful gardens and oaks draped with tendrils of Spanish moss. Then the houses grew sparse and disappeared as greenery hugged the side of the road. Leslie slowed to avoid a pothole and heard the rush of the Bogue Falaya River through the open windows.

The trees thinned, revealing the two stone spires of The Abbey. Apprehension snaked through her as she pictured Beau, her sister, and all the unsettling things she associated with the derelict church.

A wall of dense red buckeye bushes swaying in the breeze shrouded the road. Leslie drove through an opening someone carved out long ago. A cleared lot lay hidden beyond the dense hedge, surrounded by thick pines and oaks, with paths leading down a steep embankment to the river’s edge.

The lot served those who came in the summer months to visit the river for tubing, swimming, and small watercraft fun. Many parts of the river could barely accommodate a canoe, but the portion at the bend was wide, shallow, and offered a great place for families to gather.

Leslie got out of the car, listening to the sweet refrain of birds in the trees. “No one’s here today.”

“It’s still too early. Everybody from school likes to come after dark.” Derek led her to a pine-straw-covered path and to the shore of the rushing river.

Something moved in the dense underbrush. Leslie walked ahead, trying to get a better look. “What’s that?”

She crossed several broken branches until she stumbled on something nestled in the foliage. The stench of rotting flesh hit her nose. She gagged and slowed to a stop.

“Wait, be careful.” Derek swept aside a few leafy twigs to get a better look.

Flies covered the bloated belly of a white-tailed deer. Deep grooves slashed into what remained of the deer’s neck. The poor animal’s hindquarters appeared torn away.

Leslie crept closer. “What could do such a thing?”

Derek took her hand and backed out of the brush. “I bet it was the wild dogs.”

Leslie let him lead her away from the stench. “What wild dogs?”

River of Ashes

He stopped outside of the brush. “They’re around here. A couple of weeks ago, Mom said some hunters came in the diner and reported seeing them.”

“Where did they come from?” Leslie’s voice shook.

Derek guided her to a path curving down a long slope. The roar of the river grew louder.

“There are lots of stories. I heard they were left behind when the monks abandoned the place. Legend has it that when they appear, death is near.”

A shudder ran through her.

Derek tugged Leslie’s hand. “Come on.”

The path widened, and a beach came into view. The outcropping of white sand had a collection of green picnic tables, red barrel trash cans, and fire pits along the river’s edge. Around the beach, thick brush covered the shore with limbs from pine trees dipping into the water. The sun sparkled on the gentle waves.

Leslie followed him along the shoreline until they came to a rusted iron gate with a *No Trespassing* sign secured to it. The sign, decorated with crosses and swirls, marked the entrance to The Abbey grounds. Stepping through the open gate, she peered up at the imposing structure.

Two spires of white limestone, shaped like the tip of a sword, cut into the blue sky. A structure of red brick and limestone, the front windows and doors secured with loose scraps of plywood, sat in the middle of a field of high grass. The squat stone building of cloisters behind The Abbey remained intact. The Benedictine monks, who had run the seminary and were responsible for the preparation of future priests, demolished the dormitories, refectory, and library after they abandoned the site. The rest remained because, in the South, it was considered bad luck to tear down churches.

“Some place, huh?” Derek let go of her hand and ventured across the high grass.

A wave of panic shot through Leslie.

The grounds, unkempt after years of neglect, were a hodgepodge of weeds, overgrown trees, and vines.

Why would people come here at night?

“You ever wonder why those monks just up and left?” Leslie was uncomfortable with the eerie quiet. Even the birds had stopped singing. “Everyone says they got a better offer from the seminary in New Orleans, but it seems funny a bunch of people abandoned the place for no reason.”

Derek parted a thick pile of tall grass with his shoe. “My mom told me it was falling apart when she was a kid, and the Archdiocese didn’t have the money to fix it. So, they packed up the school and sent the monks and all the staff to New Orleans.”

River of Ashes

“I read once that the structure dates back to the early 1800s, when the Devereaux family built it as a private church.” Leslie eyed the empty belfry atop one of the square-shaped towers. “You’d think they’d want to save it.”

Derek nudged her with his elbow. “Maybe the ghost drove them away.”

Beau’s tale had been in the back of her mind the whole time, but Derek’s comment spooked the crap out of her. “By ghost, do you mean the lady in white?”

“Yep.” He scanned the land around them. “They say she appears when the moon is full or during storms.”

The thought of being alone in such a disturbing place terrified her. “Have you ever seen the ghost?”

Derek searched the thick foliage ahead of them. “Nah. I’ve never seen anything.”

Granite steps appeared as they drew near the entrance.

Leslie kicked herself for letting him talk her into coming to this place. “What about the wild dogs? Have you seen them around The Abbey?”

“Not to worry, love, I’ll protect you from ghosts, wild dogs, and Beau Devereaux.” He climbed the steps, encouraging her to join him. “But I have to draw the line at your mother. There’s no way I’m taking her on in a fight.”

On the porch, beneath the cracked and chipped stone arch above the doors, she waited while Derek wrestled with the plywood covering the entrance. Despite the creep factor, the lush green trees surrounding them had a soothing effect. Leslie breathed in the fresh pine scent and mossy aroma of the tall grass. Then a fly zipped past her face.

Thud.

She turned and discovered Derek had pushed a large piece of plywood securing the door out of the way, leaving a nice-sized gap to crawl through.

“How did you do that?”

Derek held the plywood to the side for her. “The loose boards have been rigged to open easily.”

Leslie dipped her head and looked through the doorway. “You sure it’s safe?”

“I wouldn’t bring you here if it wasn’t, love.”

His smile won over her fears.

Once inside, it took a moment for her eyes to adjust. Pinpoints of light shone on a floor covered with clumps of debris. In the roof, thousands of holes, some big and some small, littered the space between the bare beams where parts of plaster had fallen away. Birds’ nests of light-colored hay and twigs nestled against blackish beams and shadowy eaves, creating a patchwork design on the ceiling. It reminded Leslie of the quilt her grandmother had made for her as a child.

River of Ashes

Derek appeared, shining a beam of light on the floor.

She pointed at the flashlight. "Where did you get that?"

"Me and the guys have been here a few times. We've stashed stuff around the place. We even have sleeping bags and water bottles socked away."

Here she was a nervous wreck while his friends had turned it into their personal campground. Leslie's skin crawled at the idea of spending the night in such a place. "I don't know why you guys come here."

He took her hand, and the beam bounced on the dusty floor. "I don't get why you're so freaked out. It's just an old building. There's nothing sinister about it."

Beau's words about taking her to The Abbey sent a shiver down her spine. Any girl would be at his mercy in such a place. She questioned her sister's choices, knowing she'd been there with Beau.

Derek swung the light across the floor, shining it on dozens of rotted pews, leaves, twigs, crumbled plaster pieces from the ceiling, and skeletons of dead birds. "Lots of animals use this place as shelter. I've seen possums, raccoons, deer, and once, I swear I saw a black leopard running out the back."

Leslie became even more uneasy about being in the building. "You wouldn't happen to have a shotgun in your stash."

"The animals don't bother me, just the people."

Their footfalls echoed through the vast structure as they ventured farther. Leslie kept expecting someone or something to jump out from the shadows. Her only distraction was the intricate carvings atop the arches and the paintings on the walls. Men and angels exchanged timid glances as rays of light from parting clouds shined down.

Paintings of Noah and the flood, Adam and Eve, and other Genesis stories were barely visible on the white plaster covering the arches along the central aisle. In one spot, where the roof remained intact, she could make out the image of Moses holding the Ten Commandments. His eyes stood out the most. It was like they carried the burning wrath of God.

Shivering, Leslie looked ahead to a white archway marking the entrance to the altar. The gleam of the limestone appeared pristine. She got closer to the most sacred part of the old church, and her sense of dread rose. She spun around to face the scattered, rotting pews behind them.

"What is it?" Derek asked, taking her hand.

His voice rattled inside the hollows of the church, adding to her anxiety. They stood under the circular dome where the altar had once been, and then a low growl came from a shadowy corner.

The air left her lungs. Her senses heightened. Seconds ticked by while she listened for other sounds. "Tell me you heard that."

River of Ashes

Derek raised his finger to his lips and nodded to a door on his left.

She wanted to run but followed his lead, inching across the debris-laden floor, trying not to snap any twigs or make a noise.

She held her breath as he reached for the rusted doorknob. It turned, and the old, warped door gave way without a creak. Once they were on the other side, Derek gently shut it.

Her heartbeat slowed, and she relaxed her shoulders. "What was that?"

"Wild dog, maybe. I don't know." He put his ear to the door. "I've never heard anything in there before."

"Maybe we should go."

"I'm not going back through the church." Derek glanced around the short hallway, brandishing his flashlight. "We can get out through here." He motioned the beam down a corridor. "There's an opening up ahead."

Leslie clung to him, wishing they were outside. "What is this place?"

"The cells." Derek kept his voice low.

Leslie squeezed his arm and peered into the dim, cavernous corridor ahead, with only patches of light coming through the thick stone walls. "I wish we hadn't come."

"It will be fine, I promise." He patted her hand. "Nothing will hurt you. I won't let it."

They crept along, their feet hitting sticks and fallen pieces of plaster from the crumbling walls. Puddles of water dotted the uneven stone floor along with mounds of dead leaves. The low ceiling had roots coming through it, and the walls were cold and slimy to the touch. Derek shined his flashlight into the first room on the left. It was a depressingly small space composed of four walls and no windows.

It reminded Leslie of a jail cell rather than a place where a person would choose to live.

Scraps of paper littered the ground of the next cell they came across. Another had a rusty metal-framed bed. Several rooms had cracks in their plaster ceilings along with patches of mold. When they stumbled on rat skeletons, Leslie grabbed Derek.

At the end of the passageway, sunlight snuck through a break in the wall. The intrusion was a welcome sight, and Leslie's fear abated. The jagged opening allowed green leaves from the plants outside to reach in, and creeping vines jutted up toward the ceiling. Along the floor, a thick pile of dead leaves hid the lower part of the opening.

"There was a cave-in along the wall here." Derek brushed the leaves aside, revealing a breach able to accommodate one person at a time. "The other cells past this point are too dangerous to explore. We can get out here and avoid going back through The Abbey."

River of Ashes

Derek turned off his flashlight and handed it to her. He pushed the leaves back, moved the vines down, and kicked the debris at the bottom away, trying to clear the opening.

While he worked, a glimmering light from inside one of the cells down the corridor distracted her. She flipped on the flashlight and angled it into the tight quarters beyond the cave-in.

The walls in this portion of the structure had deeper cracks. The fissures ran along the entire ceiling and down to the floors. Patches of black mold were everywhere. What struck her as odd was the lack of debris. It appeared freshly swept, with no leaves or rat skeletons littering the ground.

“What are you doing?” Derek said behind her.

Leslie headed to the room where she’d spotted the strange light. “I saw something.”

The smell of rot and mold curled her nose. Her skin brushed against the slimy walls, and she cringed. But something compelled her to keep going into the section Derek had deemed too dangerous to explore.

“Leslie, stop.”

She ignored him and pressed on, testing the floor with the toe of her shoe as she carefully progressed. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch, but this time a sensation of excitement went with it. She felt like Indiana Jones exploring a lost tomb, waiting for a booby trap to jump out at her.

Leslie’s beam of light filtered into the room, and her heart crept higher in her throat. She rounded the edge of the wall and halted.

The cell was small without any windows, but this room appeared lived in. Along the far wall, below a pair of rusted pipes where a sink had once been, was a green cot—army issue. It had a pillow and green blanket neatly stacked on top. At the foot sat a blue ice chest with an assortment of red candles.

Leslie went up to the cot, and her foot tapped something beneath. She bent down and discovered an old CD player.

Footfalls came from behind. She swerved the flashlight to Derek. “Did you do this?”

“Do what?” He shielded his eyes and stepped inside.

She wanted to believe he had no idea any of this was here, but the whole scenario seemed too well-planned.

“What the hell?” Derek approached the cot and lifted the pillow.

She stood back, studying his reaction. “I thought you said this portion was dangerous.”

“It is.” Derek went to the ice chest and moved the candles to check inside.

She couldn’t picture Derek setting this up. That wasn’t the guy she

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knew. “Why would anyone come here for a rendezvous?”

The ice chest closed with a *thunk*. “It’s not exactly romantic. If I wanted to have my way with you, I’d bring champagne and take you to a nice hotel.”

“But we can’t afford a bottle of champagne, let alone a nice hotel.” She sighed, inspecting the room.

Derek glanced at Leslie, then directed the beam at an array of mazelike chinks scarring the plaster-covered wall. “It’s not going to collapse today, but I wouldn’t want to stay here long. Let’s go before whoever left this stuff comes back.”

He ushered her into the corridor and to the gap in the wall. Pushing the leaves aside, he eased his shoulder through until he disappeared into the sunlight. Then, he stuck his hand back in and wiggled his fingers at her. She grabbed it, smiling, and followed his lead, working her right shoulder into the mass of leaves. They brushed against her face, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, she was in the midst of an overgrown camellia bush.

Derek urged her forward, and she soon stood in thigh-high weeds. A breeze brushed the tops of the long stalks against her hand. Sunshine hit her face, and she raised her head, soaking up the warm rays, thankful to be outside.

Beside her sat a beautiful triple-tiered fountain with an angel on top, raising her arms to the heavens. A silent witness to the past.

Leslie glanced back at the hidden opening and wondered how anyone had found such a spot. Her fear of The Abbey returned, but this time it wasn’t the ghost stories or talk of wild dogs that upset her.

This trip had made Beau’s threats even more real. The isolation and helplessness any girl would feel if trapped alone with him would make them an easy target.

How could she get her sister, or anyone else, to see the dangerous predator lurking beneath the brilliant smile and good looks of St. Benedict’s golden boy?

Chapter Seven

The light from the fire pit chased away the shadows from the woods along the outskirts of Devereaux land. Beau warmed his hands as Mitch Clarkson, the towering ebony-skinned player from the football team, recounted their last victory against Martin High. Josh Breeland, the defensive end with arms as big as tree trunks, sat next to him while Jenson Theriot reclined against a stump across from Beau. The redhead’s eyes darted between them, appearing unsure.

Mitch popped the top off a beer bottle. “That Boulder kid got past you

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last week. You didn't see him comin', did ya? Made you miss a block and almost got Beau's ass sacked."

"Almost cost us the game," Beau added.

Jenson put down the beer Mitch swiped from his old man's stash. "Yeah, I know, I blew it. That's why I was surprised you asked me to come out here. I'll make it up to you at the next game. I promise. I'll make every block, Beau. You can count on me."

Beau traced a circle in the dirt with a stick. "I know. You just need a little incentive. That's why we're here."

Jenson peered into the thick covering of pine and oaks surrounding their fire. "You got a sweet place, Beau. I never knew these woods were behind your house. Kind of creepy, though."

Josh cracked open another beer and handed it to Jenson. "The last time we camped out here, I heard a bunch of shit crashin' through the brush. Mitch said it was deer. My guess is a pack of raccoons."

Beau's grip on his water bottle tightened. "It was wild dogs. We get them on the property. My dad thinks they come over from The Abbey grounds. Even shot a couple."

Jenson looked at his two beers. "I shot a buck once. I didn't like it much." He set one of the beers down.

"Then you didn't do it right," Beau insisted. "The fun is tracking down your prey. And make sure it never sees you coming."

"Dude, chug it down," Josh said, picking up Jenson's beer. "Ain't gonna get fun 'round here until you've emptied a six-pack."

"Hell yeah!" Mitch hollered.

Beau grinned at his friends' enthusiasm. He couldn't carry out his plan without them.



Beau stared down at the sleeping giant curled up next to the fire. Jenson drooled as he slept off the beers Josh had practically force-fed him. Beau racked the shotgun in his hand, ready for the festivities to begin. He nudged Jenson's hip with the weapon. "Wakey, wakey, Jenny. We're going hunting."

Jenson stirred, his eyelids slowly fluttering open. Then he bolted upright, wide-eyed.

Beau, Mitch, and Josh stood around him, wearing grotesque dog masks. Beau liked how the shadows cast by the firelight made them look like monsters. He liked the fear in Jenson's eyes even more.

Beau aimed the shotgun at him. "Run, dog."

Jenson scrambled to his feet, pulling at his falling jeans. "What the

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hell?” He held up his hands. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Aw, come on, Jenny,” Mitch teased, slapping his shoulder. “You’re gonna be our prey tonight.”

Jenson stood, the vein along his neck pulsating. “Guys, come on, now. Stop foolin’. I don’t wanna go runnin’ in these woods.” He motioned at the trees. “Beau said they got wild dogs—”

The boom of Beau’s gun going off pierced the night.

Jenson cowered while Mitch and Josh snickered.

“Run, Jenny, run!” Beau shouted.

Jenson took a step away, not appearing too motivated.

Beau pointed the gun at his head. “I said move.” He growled.

Jenson tripped over a log as he hurried to the edge of the firelight. He hesitated before the curtain of darkness that led to the deepest reaches of the Devereaux Estate and glanced back at Beau and his friends. Wiping his eyes, he took in their dog masks, then eased between two tall pines and disappeared.

“Run, Jenny!” Josh called out.

Beau lowered his weapon and turned to his friends. “Chase him down the trail to the point I showed you. By then, he should learn to move his ass faster on the field.”

Josh howled, getting into character. He took off into the darkness, carrying Beau’s flashlight.

Mitch followed right behind, wielding one of the electric lamps Beau brought from the house.

Beau tucked the rifle under his arm and returned to the campfire. He grabbed a backpack and set out in the opposite direction from the others. He had work to do.



Beau sat by a tree, keeping his lamp off and letting his eyes adjust to the utter blackness around him. He listened to the night, zeroing in on any hint that Jenson was nearby. He breathed in the cool air, feeling powerful. Beau loved the night and relished the mysterious woods around his home. He loved disappearing into them when he was a child, back when he’d sneak out his bedroom window after his parents went to sleep and would roam the dark trails.

Beau learned a lot during his nightly wanderings. He’d set traps, and when he captured something small, like a squirrel or possum, he’d amuse himself. His father caught him climbing back in his bedroom window one night, covered in blood. That was when Gage put in an alarm, bringing his activities to an end.

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Thrashing arose to his left. Beau waited by the tree, knowing his prey was near. Nothing moved like a man in the woods, and a frightened one was louder than a bullhorn on a still night.

The bumbling obstacle to Beau's winning season quickly approached. He held his breath, excited by the fluttering in his stomach. He held off his attack until he could see Jenson's thick shape in front of him.

Beau pushed off the ground and tackled the useless fool.

Jenson cried out, and his weight sent him tumbling into a deep hole.

Beau grinned as he heard him groaning from its depths. He removed a ChemLight from the side pocket of his camo pants and cracked it. An eerie greenish light expanded outward, illuminating the old farm well Beau had uncovered earlier that day. "You okay down there, Jenny?"

"Beau?" Jenson sounded petrified. "Is that you? Get me out of here, man."

Beau stepped closer to the edge of the dry well. "Not ready to do that quite yet." He dropped the green light into the hole and saw Jenson cowering against the wall.

"Get me out of here!" Jenson screamed.

"Sorry, Jenny. You, ah, might want to keep an eye out. You're not alone in there."

Jenson snatched up the glow stick and waved it around. Then he froze. The ghostly light illuminated a snake coiled up to the side.

His shriek was music to Beau's ears. "It's hard to say what I put in there with you. It was dark, so I couldn't tell if your little friend is venomous or not."

"Come on," Jenson hollered. "This isn't funny."

"Maybe not to you," Beau grinned. "But I bet you'll move your lard ass and block whatever comes my way from now on."

"I'm sorry, Beau. I'm sorry," Jenson whimpered. "Please get me out of here."

Beau went to his backpack, which rested at the base of a tree. "Now I want you to sit there and think about how you're not gonna screw up again. I can't have you making me look bad." He slipped the pack around his shoulder. "Got that, Jenny?"

"Please, I won't mess up again!"

Jenson's voice reminded Beau of a woman in a horror movie—high-pitched and about to meet her maker.

"No, you won't." Beau chuckled. "Or I might have to come up with a worse punishment."

He flipped on his flashlight and scoured the ground, looking for the trail back to camp. Beau could thank his father for that. Gage was a stickler for

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making it easy to get around the uncleared portions of the estate. Tonight, Beau had taken full advantage.

Screams followed him as he moved deeper into the woods. The hours he'd spent planning Jenson's tomblike confines were worth it.

The land around his home was a haven, but he preferred the shores along the river. He might be the heir apparent, but he wasn't in control—Gage was. Only at the river was he king.

Flames danced through the trees. Beau switched off his flashlight and followed the orange glow back to his friends.

Mitch and Josh sat by the fire pit, their dog masks abandoned at their feet. They turned when they heard Beau coming.

"Where's Jenson?" Josh stood and looked behind him.

Beau slipped the pack from around his shoulders and warmed his hands. "Don't know. Lost him in the woods somewhere."

Mitch went to the break in the trees Beau had come through. "But where? We kept him on the path, just like you said, and stopped chasing him at the marker you showed us."

Beau sat down and took a bottle of water from his pack. "You two should go look for him. Make sure he's all right."

"What if he's hurt?" Josh asked.

"He'll be fine. Hopefully, a little wiser and not as clumsy on the field."

Mitch flipped on a flashlight and glanced at Josh. "Let's go."

Beau waited as their crunching through the brush faded. He sat back and looked up at the pinpoints of stars above the treetops. Staring at the sky, he thought about the others he wanted to teach a lesson.

"They'll never see me coming."