

River of Wrath (St. Benedict #2)
By Alexandra Weis and Lucas Astor

Advance Reader Copy

Chapter One

Sweat gathered under the brim of Kent Davis's Stetson as he walked the sandy beach along the Bogue Falaya River. He didn't feel the brisk January breeze or pay attention to the mutterings of his forensic team. The unease burning in his gut shut out all distractions. He rested his hands on his belt, brushing his Louisiana Sheriff Department badge. The rub of metal reminded him of the oath he'd sworn to protect and serve, but on days like this, he hated his job.

Dispatch had initially deemed the early morning call from a frantic jogger a hoax. After an officer confirmed there was a body, Kent arrived at the scene to confront his worst nightmare—another murder. He already had three unsolved deaths weighing heavily on his department. Two high school students and a woman from out of town had died there since fall. City leaders had been breathing down his neck for answers.

Kent studied the black body bag the technicians carried up the embankment. This was only going to make his job harder.

The last of his crew combed the beach, where receding floodwaters had exposed a young woman's grave. From the looks of her bleached bones, partially covered in the remnants of a red dress, she'd been there for quite some time. He doubted they'd find anything admissible. There would be trace evidence, but no footprints, no debris, no blood, and no signs of struggle.

He climbed the steep hill from the beach to the parking area, scanning for any clues. Everywhere was a potential crime scene. After years of being in law enforcement, he doubted he could see the world in any other way.

"I don't like this one bit, Bill." Kent stared at the heavyset coroner waiting by the open doors of the van.

"What's there to like. We got a dead girl who's been buried here a long time." Dr. Bill Broussard removed a pair of black-framed glasses from his egg-shaped head. "You might find a lead in old missing persons reports."

"I'll access the St. Tammany Parish database when I get to the station. Until then, she's a Jane Doe." Kent eyed the coroner's van. "How long will it take to know something?"

Bill cleaned his glasses and moved out of the way while the technician slammed the doors closed. He waited until the man climbed into the driver's side before responding. "Working with only bones makes it harder to identify the cause of death. But I'll know more when I get her to the lab."

"I got enough going on with Beau Devereaux, Dawn Moore, and Andrea Harrison." Kent tipped back his hat. "This makes four bodies and no leads."

"People are gonna shit when they hear about this one." Bill motioned to the van. "We got enough rumors flying around about serial killers and rapists on the loose."

"But at least we know this isn't a serial killer."

"Do we?" Bill flipped through a few pictures on his phone and showed Kent the screen.

Kent looked at the bloody mess that had comprised the remains of Beau Devereaux. The golden boy of St. Benedict had been a football star and heir to the Devereaux fortune. The day Kent found his mutilated body along the river had been one of the worst of his career. Beau's death, on the heels of the rape and grisly murder of Dawn Moore, had shattered his faith in their small town.

He squinted at the picture. “What am I missing?”

Bill pointed at Beau’s bruised and bloody neck. “Trachea isn’t midline. It’s in two pieces. In the autopsy, I discovered his neck had been broken.”

Kent thought of the murder cases he had cluttering his desk. “Same as the Harrison girl. Her neck was broken. Any chance wild dogs could have done this?”

Bill’s meaty lips thinned into a line. “Harrison had no bite marks. Only Beau suffered extensive puncture wounds. For a dog to snap someone’s neck, it would have to be big and have impressive jaw strength. Until your men find me an animal like that, I’m leaving Beau’s death a homicide.” He wiped his brow. “What worries me is this woman’s bones show there might be a break in her neck, too. If that’s the case, somebody around here could have a long history of murder.”

Kent grew irate. He’d left the turmoil of working for the New Orleans Police Department to get away from the steady dose of homicides. Ten years ago, St. Benedict had been the answer to a prayer for him, his wife, and their two boys. He didn’t want to think such horror could have remained hidden for so long in the idyllic town.

“Send me the preliminary results of the autopsy as soon as you get them.”

Bill put his phone in his front jacket pocket. “Okay. What are you thinking?”

Kent pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting off a headache. “I want it in my hand when I tell Gage Devereaux what we found. He might recall someone who went missing. He’s lived here all his life and is bound to have heard something.”

Bill swatted at a passing fly. “He won’t be happy to hear about another body. You know how protective he is of St. Benedict.”

The patriarch and owner of the biggest employer, Benedict Brewery, Gage oversaw everything in the town. Some called him a control freak—a trait many had seen in his son, Beau—but to Kent, Gage was thorough, detail-oriented, and would have made a great detective if he hadn’t taken over the family business.

“Yep. I expect this will piss him off.”

“He’s gonna ask you if this has anything to do with the investigation into Beau’s death.” Bill frowned. “What are you gonna tell him?”

Kent clasped the grip on the revolver holstered to his belt. “We don’t know if any of these deaths are related.”

“Yet,” Bill added. “Seems like an awfully big coincidence to me.”

Kent pulled keys from the front pocket of his jeans. “There are too many damned coincidences going on here, and they all seem to center around this river.” He twirled his keys around his index finger. “When can you get me a DNA report?”

“Might take a while.” Bill scratched his head. “Budget constraints and the backlog of cases clogging the system have slowed everything down.”

“How long are we talking? A week?”

Bill snorted. “More like weeks. A long-dead Jane Doe isn’t exactly a priority, otherwise, we could get a rush on it.”

Kent ran his fingers over his damp brow. “Then we’ll just have to wait and see what we get back.”

Bill went to the driver’s side of the van and spoke to the technician. He then waved at Kent before walking away.

The sheriff waited as the van slowly eased onto the main road, with Bill’s black SUV following close behind.

Alone, Kent removed his hat and gazed up at the tall pines rimming the parking lot. Cresting above the tallest of the trees was The Abbey’s single charred limestone spire—its twin lost in the fire.

The serene place had seen so many atrocities—suicide, fire, and Dawn Moore’s murder. Kent would never understand what the Benedictine monks who founded the seminary ever saw in that cursed land. Legends about the abandoned abbey and its wild dogs had floated around the community for as long as anyone could remember.

When the dogs appear, death is near.

He’d never believed any of the stories until now. Kent feared there may be some truth to the legend, after all.

And the worst was yet to come.

Chapter Two

The warm air blowing through the vents in Leslie’s new car did little to offset the bite of winter. She was constantly freezing these days, no matter how bright the sunshine or how high the heat.

Kelly Norton sat in the passenger seat as Leslie drove along Devereaux Road. She’d offered her a ride to school and was thankful when she accepted.

“I’m glad my mother moved here,” Kelly said while gazing out the window. “Having you guys around has helped. But it worked out well for all of us, huh? Now we have each other’s backs.”

Leslie tucked a loose lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “Yeah, even though how the four of us became close wasn’t ... Well, it’s behind us.”

Kelly’s gaze dropped to her hands. “Do you ever think about that night and what we did? No matter how hard I try, I can’t get it out of my head.”

Leslie was keenly aware of how Beau Devereaux still haunted his victims. Alone at night, she swore his shadow lingered in the corner of her room, the hatred in his eyes scorching her skin.

“I killed the wrong Moore twin.”

His voice would send Leslie bolting from bed, drenched in sweat. The nightly visit from the sinister son of a bitch who had murdered her sister kept her teetering on the edge. “We did what we had to.” Leslie bit her lower lip, fighting to shut Beau out. “We paid him back for what he did to all of us.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t get it. He was alive when we left him at The Abbey. After you dropped us off at school, we all went home, figuring he’d spend the night tied to a chair. So what happened?” A line deepened across Kelly’s brow. “I wonder if he had something to do with the girl they found at the river.”

Leslie turned to her. “I heard the girl’s been dead for ages. It couldn’t have been Beau.”

“But that means someone around here probably killed her. Makes me appreciate the extra security at our new condo. Mr. Devereaux insisted my mom take the place.” Kelly patted the black dashboard. “I guess we should be grateful he’s been so generous.”

Leslie stiffened at the mention of Gage. He was the other Devereaux she’d never be free of. “Luckily, the launch of his national campaign provided a plausible explanation for the bonuses Gage gave our parents. It would be hard to explain away my car, Taylor’s Jeep, Sara’s truck, and your fancy condo without it.”

Kelly rolled a ringlet of red hair between her fingers. “Have you talked to Derek or are you still pretending it’s over? The guy’s so in love with you it’s almost painful.”

Leslie’s heart ached. After losing her sister, pushing Derek away had been the hardest thing she’d ever done. “He was asking too many questions.”

“How long do you think we have before everyone finds out what we did?” Kelly muttered as

she peered out the window. “The one thing about secrets is they never stay hidden.”

Guilt tightened Leslie’s throat. She should be used to the sensation by now, but it still filled her with the same self-loathing. The person who mattered most was Derek, and he would despise her for taking part in Beau’s death. She’d pushed him away before the truth tore them apart. Leslie reasoned that was better than watching him walk away, hating her forever.

Shivering, Leslie ratcheted up the heat again.

“Are you sure about going this way?” Kelly asked.

For several weeks, Leslie had avoided the road leading to the river and The Abbey. Not even having Kelly by her side could stop that horrible crawling feeling in her belly, but a nagging compulsion drove her forward. “I want to see where they found the body.”

Kelly’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You’re not afraid it will remind you of ...”

Leslie clenched the steering wheel. Every conversation, thought, and breath reminded her of Dawn’s death. Her hate for Beau had been the armor getting her through the funeral and a future without her twin. It had initially driven her to meet with Gage Devereaux and demand justice. But her restlessness had not abated after Beau’s demise. She still needed answers about why Dawn had died so senselessly. She once believed revenge would soothe her grief, but it only seemed to escalate it.

“I can’t run away from what happened.” She coughed to cover her welling emotions. “Dawn would want me to live my life as best I can.”

Kelly put her hand over Leslie’s forearm and gave her an encouraging squeeze. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I can’t imagine how hard going back to school after Christmas break is. Maybe you need more time.”

Leslie wanted to laugh. “And miss my last semester of high school? No way. Besides, knowing the bastard who killed my sister is rotting in hell helps me go on.”

Kelly’s eyes narrowed into slits. “Beau deserved what he got.”

“Look at that.” Leslie slowed the car and pointed at a stretch of yellow caution tape. “This must be close to where they found her.”

Kelly crossed her arms tightly over her chest. “Yeah, and everyone partying at the river has probably been walking over her grave.”

A deputy in the parking lot carried equipment to a white evidence van.

Leslie pulled over to the side of the road. “No wonder this place always creeped me out.”

Kelly kept her gaze pinned on the parking lot. “I wonder who she is. Too bad we can’t ask the lady in white. I heard she was the seminary’s gamekeeper and now haunts the area. I bet she knows all the ghosts hanging around the river.”

“Where did you hear about the gamekeeper?”

Kelly glanced at Leslie. “After the fire, I searched the internet and found an article about the female gamekeeper and her dogs. Maybe the dogs that killed Beau are their descendants.”

Leslie stifled a small smile. “Yeah, I heard he was pretty chewed up.”

Kelly rolled down her window. “Aren’t you hot?”

The rush of wintry air was a shock to her system. The aroma of pine trees and the distant rush of water clashed with her senses. The trees around the parking lot entrance swayed in the breeze, and she caught a glimpse of The Abbey’s remaining charred spire.

The thought of what Dawn had endured in that place made Leslie sick. She’d gotten a whiff of scorched skin coming from the hospital room, but her parents had kept her from seeing the scope of Dawn’s injuries. “Do you think the girl they found will haunt the river, too?”

“I guess if you believe people hang around where they—” Her mouth clamped shut. “She’s not there. Dawn’s in Heaven.” Kelly took her hand. “You’re like ice.” She rolled up the window.

Leslie managed a faint smile, not wanting to appear indifferent. “I’d like to believe that. But I’ve

heard some people in town whispering about seeing Dawn's ghost at The Abbey."

"You can't believe that. That's just bullshit started by idiots wanting attention." Kelly gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Dawn would never haunt The Abbey."

"But what if she is? What if she's trapped there and looking for me?" Leslie's dread escalated at the thought of her sister alone and lost in such a horrid place. "I can't rest until I know for sure."

"What are you going to do? Spend nights at The Abbey chasing shadows?"

Leslie put the car into drive, wishing she'd never mentioned her fear to Kelly. "I don't know, but I'll figure something out."

Kelly frowned. "Don't you dare go there by yourself."

Leslie checked the road before pulling out. "Maybe this is something I need to do alone."

Kelly angrily pointed at Leslie. "There you go again with your, 'I need to be alone crap.' What's up with that? And don't tell me it has to do with Dawn or breaking up with Derek. Ever since you bailed on us after leaving The Abbey that night, you've been pulling away. I get that you want space, but this lone wolf shit has to end. What we did bound the four of us together forever. You can't run from the past."

The burden of hiding her role in Beau's death pressed on Leslie's chest like a barbell. It had been her choice to participate in Beau's end, but no one warned her about the repercussions—the sleepless nights, the nightmares, the guilt, and resentment. There were moments when Leslie questioned if she should've stayed away from Gage and left Beau to the cops. But she knew it was the right call, even if she found it hard to live with.

"I'm not running," she finally told Kelly while driving toward Main Street. "I've been trying to get my head straight." She kept her eyes on the road, choosing not to face her friend. "It's funny, when we were at The Abbey and had Beau where we wanted him, I was convinced my life would get better after that. But now I realize that wasn't the end of my grief. It was the beginning."

Kelly offered her an encouraging smile. "I'm here if you need me. We all are. Taylor and Sara are worried about you, too."

Leslie arched an eyebrow. "Sara doesn't worry about anyone but Sara."

"Boy, ain't that the truth." Kelly sat back in the leather seat. "All Sara talks about these days is her new clothes. That girl is obsessed with shopping."

The traffic lights of Main Street shone in the distance. Leslie had survived their trip to the river without breaking down. On the inside, her melee of emotions was, at times, staggering. Losing Derek had taken away the last guide rails to her sanity. No matter how much Kelly and the others tried to help, Leslie remained convinced that her descent into hopelessness was an absolute certainty.

Leslie pulled her car into the school parking lot. Confronting the daunting red brick walls of St. Benedict High after the long Christmas break wasn't going to be easy. She welcomed the distraction of school but not the memories the familiar halls awakened. No matter how much she prepared to see images of her twin everywhere, Leslie doubted she would ever feel comfortable inside the school again, especially with graduation quickly approaching. For Dawn's sake, she would force herself to embrace every experience. That was her promise to her sister—to accumulate enough happy, meaningful, and bizarre moments to fill two lifetimes.

Kelly got out of the car and gazed around the quiet parking lot. "Where is everyone?"

Leslie hit the lock on her remote and pulled her blue coat closer. "It's freezing. They're probably inside."

"You've been cold a lot lately. Are you getting sick?" Kelly asked, walking toward her.

“Maybe I need to load up on vitamin C or something.”

Kelly remained close as they made their way to the entrance. Leslie was glad to have her there, but she missed walking into school with Derek. She’d battled with her feelings for him too many times to count, but today would be tough.

Only a few students lingered on the grassy quad outside the school. Like Leslie, everyone headed to the stone steps leading to the front doors, anxious to be out of the frigid breeze.

The moment she stepped inside, she sighed at the embrace of warm air. But her reprieve was short-lived. All the students gathered at the entrance turned her way, and an uncanny silence swept through the hall. Then, the whispering began.

Kelly encouraged her along with a gentle nudge. “Ignore them.”

After Dawn’s death, Leslie had been too wrapped up in grief to give a damn about the stories circulating in town. But the dead girl at the river had sparked fresh gossip about her sister.

Leslie followed Kelly through a small crowd clogging the corridor. “You think they’d be terrified another body was found. I swear the people in this town are obsessed with death.”

Kelly stared down a group of freshman girls huddled together. “Everyone believes it will never happen to them until it does.”

Leslie gripped the strap of her bag, thinking of her sister’s bouncy walk and swinging ponytail. “Some sooner than others.”

“All right, bitches.” The boisterous declaration came from behind the freshmen. “Get lost.” Sara Bissell emerged from a flurry of girls scrambling for cover. Dressed in black from head to toe with matching goth-inspired makeup, Bondage Bissell, as she was known, had changed her look.

“What the hell, Sara?” Kelly said.

“It’s Madame Sara now. I’m a medium.” She placed a hand on her hip. “I discovered my gift when my parents took me to New Orleans over Christmas vacation. A fortune-teller in Jackson Square told me I could speak to the dead. God knows this town has more than its fair share.” She grimaced as her attention fell on Leslie. “Damn, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say Dawn was—”

“Did this fortune-teller say to dress like that?” Leslie interrupted, changing the subject.

Kelly motioned to Sara’s outfit and chuckled. “You look more like a vampire than a medium.”

“Fuck off.” Sara tossed her long platinum-blonde hair over her shoulder.

Leslie stepped between them. “We’re just surprised by the sudden change.”

Sara pressed out a crease in her skirt, her devil-may-care expression showcasing her usual blithe attitude. “With all the crap goin’ on, the last thing anyone would notice is little ole me.”

Kelly focused on Sara’s tall black boots, seemingly transfixed. “Madame Sara does have a point.”

Sara blessed Kelly with an exaggerated sneer. “Careful, Norton. Someone might think you have an actual brain under all that red hair.”

A slender brunette scurried up to them with a packed bag weighing down her shoulder and carrying several books. Taylor’s loose-fitting clothes and slightly disheveled appearance bothered Leslie. She’d encouraged her to get some help to cope with the aftermath of what Beau had done, but she feared Taylor had ignored her advice.

“Guys, guess what I found out?” The light in Taylor’s eyes did little to offset the dark circles beneath. “Did you know the Devereaux family has a history of mental illness?”

Sara’s glower sent the last of the students in the hallway back to their lockers. “Everyone in town knows that.” She pointed at the books in Taylor’s hands. “Are those new?”

Taylor hugged them close, her gaze guarded. “Yeah. I got them from an old bookstore over break. They have all kinds of information on families in the South. One has an entire chapter devoted to the Devereaux family.”

Leslie gently touched Taylor’s wrist. “You’ve been reading everything you can on Beau’s family?”

Why?”

“She thinks she’s gonna find an answer for why he was such an ass,” Sara said.

Taylor raised her chin, appearing unusually defiant. “That’s not it. There’s something evil about them. I read the family line was cursed by a local chieftain after the tribe’s land was stolen by a Gerard Frellson in the 1800s. The Devereauxs were Frellsons back then.”

Kelly tilted her head. “There were tribes in St. Benedict?”

Taylor nodded. “Tribes were all over St. Tammany Parish, including where The Abbey is.”

Sara cocked a dubious eyebrow. “You got all this out of a book?”

“Several, plus old newspapers.” Taylor shifted her bag.

Leslie flinched when the loud peal of a bell echoed through the hall.

A brooding guy with rugged good looks appeared from around the corner. Her heart dipped at the sight of Derek Foster in a new brown leather jacket. She wanted to rush to his side, but those days were over. It took every ounce of strength not to crumble when he leveled his icy gaze on her. She still loved Derek but had to keep her distance to protect him.

He slowly walked by, keeping his attention on Leslie. The furor on Derek’s face weakened her knees.

Kelly angled closer to her ear. “Are you okay?”

Leslie opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She wished she could scream from the rooftop that she would survive without Derek, but her body betrayed her.

Sara smirked after Derek walked by. “I’m so glad you dumped him. He’s not worth the risk of losin’ all we’ve got.”

Leslie shot Sara a dirty look as she noticed Derek glance back. She counted off the seconds, praying he wouldn’t say anything.

Derek quickened his stride and hurried down the hall just as the second bell rang.

Leslie’s shoulders sagged, already worn out before the day started. “Sara, you can’t say something like that in front of people. What if Derek heard you?”

“You have to pull it together.” Sara wrinkled her nose. “You’re done with Derek, so stop fallin’ apart when you see him. He’ll ask questions you can’t answer.”

Kelly twirled a red strand of hair around her fingers. “What do I tell people when they want to know why I transferred here? Questions make me nervous.”

“Tell them the truth.” Leslie encouraged. “Gage Devereaux gave your mom a job at the brewery to help prepare for the national campaign.”

Sara spun around to Taylor, her nostrils flaring. “You have to stop with the Devereaux family shit. No more research, no more books. I’ll kill you if you screw this up for us.”

Leslie bumped Sara’s shoulder. “Hey, chill. Taylor doesn’t mean any harm.”

“Then she’d better start actin’ like one of us.” Sara gave Taylor a once over. “People are talkin’ about her strange clothes and weird behavior.”

Leslie coughed into her hand. “Says the *medium*.”

Taylor snorted. “Why are you acting so paranoid? We didn’t kill Beau. Everyone knows the dogs did it.”

“But we were the reason he was at The Abbey, you little idiot.” Sara pinched Taylor’s arm. “We swore to keep quiet about what happened. That means you need to be cool. Got it?” She snatched Taylor’s phone from one of the outside pockets of her bag and started scrolling. “You didn’t keep that video of Beau and Andrea in the cells, did you?”

“Give that back.” Taylor dropped her books on the floor and tried to grab for the phone, but Sara twisted away, evading her.

Sara remained fixated on the device, and then her jaw dropped. “You lyin’ shit. You said you didn’t send the video to Sheriff Davis, so why’s it still on your phone where anyone could find it?”

She stabbed the delete icon and then furiously flicked through the photo gallery until she sucked in a sharp breath. She shot Taylor a murderous glare. “Are you out of your fucking mind? You have a picture of Beau bound to a chair in The Abbey on here.”

Taylor picked up her books. “So? I like looking at it.”

Sara shook her head and deleted the picture before shoving the phone into Taylor’s bag. “Something like that in the wrong hands would land us all in jail. If we aren’t careful, we’ll go down for killin’ that worthless asshole.”

Leslie spotted students hurrying out of the way of a woman in a vibrant green pantsuit closing in on their group. She loudly cleared her throat, wanting to warn the others.

“Ladies, is there a reason you’re still standing here after the second bell?”

Ms. Greenbriar’s screeching voice made everyone cringe.

Leslie hoped the middle-aged principal of St. Benedict High hadn’t overheard their conversation.

“Ms. Moore, Ms. Haskins, you two need to get to English lit.” Her beady eyes traveled the length of Sara’s heavy makeup and black clothes. “Ms. Bissell, that isn’t gonna fly. Go to the bathroom and wash your face, and please wear something more suitable tomorrow.”

Sara’s haughty smirk widened. “I’m a medium. I have to wear black to communicate with the dead.”

Ms. Greenbriar, aka *Madbriar*, pursed her lips. “The dead don’t attend St. Benedict High, so your services will not be needed on campus.” She pointed at the girls’ bathroom door. “Get to it.” Her gaze settled on Kelly. “Who are you?”

The color drained from Kelly’s cheeks. “Kelly Norton. I transferred from Covington High.”

Ms. Greenbriar moved closer, twisting her lips as she inspected Kelly. “Ah, yes. Come with me to my office, and we’ll get you situated.”

Kelly shot Leslie a help-me glance as she walked away with Madbriar. Leslie felt guilty for not rescuing her friend, but she didn’t need the principal up her ass on the first day. She had enough to deal with.

Taylor tugged her arm. “Let’s get to class.”

Leslie turned toward English lit and saw a sudden flash of Dawn, alive and happy, strolling the hall in her cheerleading uniform. Leslie longed to curl into a ball and disappear.

No time for that. You must go on for Dawn.

Chapter Three

Gage Devereaux sat behind a massive desk as he stared out the wall of windows in his office. The morning light breaking over Benedict Brewery brought out the green rooftops and shimmered along the bricks of the smokestack atop the main building.

He’d devoted his life to this place, and Beau had almost brought it crashing to the ground. He should have known the boy would screw up. Years of hard work and a small fortune would’ve gone down the drain if his son’s true nature had gotten out.

Now there would be different problems to deal with—the four girls who’d suffered at Beau’s hands. He had to keep them quiet for the sake of the Devereaux name.

“Gage?”

Kent Davis stood in his office doorway.

The lean, scrappy man with his brown, sweat-stained sheriff’s uniform shirt and blue jeans

seemed better suited for a job as a ranch hand than a law officer. But Kent's easygoing manner had won Gage over, and his tight rein on crime in their small town had put everyone at ease—until the first body had shown up at the river.

Gage suspected something was amiss by the way Kent held his Stetson, nervously thumbing the brim. Then he spotted the manila envelope under his arm. The sheriff was there on official business. Gage stilled the current of doubt surging through him. He had to appear calm and collected at all times. *Never let anyone see who you really are.*

"Kent, what can I do for you?"

The sheriff moved into the office, his gait slower than usual. "You need to be aware of what we found at the river."

Gage folded his hands, maintaining his unruffled persona. "Is this regarding the woman everyone's talking about?"

Kent stood before the desk, looking him in the eye. "The recent high water exposed her grave. Bill Broussard estimates she's been dead about twenty-five years."

Shock forced the air from Gage's lungs. *It can't be.* Then he quickly suppressed his reaction. "Any idea who she is?"

Kent's jaw muscles tightened. "I was going to ask you the same thing. No one shows up in my records, but I thought you might recall a missing person from when you were in high school."

Gage flexed his fingers. "That's a long time ago."

"I know, but was there any gossip about a missing girl? Maybe a tourist who disappeared?"

Gage remembered he was supposed to be a grieving father and had better act like one. He added a touch of fragility to his voice when he asked, "Are you going to let some dead girl who died in the nineties distract you from my son's case?"

The sheriff tossed the envelope on the desk. "This girl might have more to do with your son's death than you think. That's Bill's autopsy report. Cause of death was a broken neck. Andrea Harrison, the woman we found in the river, had a broken neck, too. So did your son."

Gage stood and picked up the envelope. He pulled out the document, scanned the report, then tossed it down. "You can't expect me to believe these are all related."

Kent tapped his hat against his thigh. "All I know for sure is this town hasn't had a murder since 1942. In a matter of months, I have what could be four. In my experience, when bodies start piling up you have to look for a pattern."

The burn in the pit of Gage's stomach flared into a blaze. "Are you saying a serial killer has been hiding in St. Benedict for twenty-five years?"

"I'm saying these deaths have one obvious thing in common—they happened around The Abbey."

Anger brought back a flood of memories, mostly bad, about Beau and his obsession with the river. "It's a ruin. How can you think my son's death is related to any of this? He was killed by wild dogs."

Sheriff Davis hesitated as he studied Gage. "We know Beau was held at The Abbey. We found traces of his DNA, and there were zip tie burns on his wrists. But how he ended up at the river is a mystery. There's no evidence he was dragged or put up a struggle. And Bill said it would've taken one damn big dog to break Beau's neck. Until we find an animal like that, I'm not ruling out homicide."

Gage took a deep breath, fighting off a wave of panic. *Fuck.*

"If you ask me, this was done by pros, and the dogs helped cover their tracks." Kent raked his fingers through his hair. "You've got enemies, we both know it. I want to hand the investigation over to the St. Tammany Sheriff's Department. I just oversee St. Benedict and don't have their resources."

That irked the living shit out of Gage. If Kent brought in the parish investigators, things would move quickly on the case. “You seriously want to involve more people who’ll ask me the same gut-wrenching questions about Beau? Do you know what this has done to my wife? My business?” Gage slammed his fist into a pile of papers on his desk. “Damn it, no outsiders. It won’t bring Beau back. It won’t heal his mother’s broken heart, and it won’t make my life any easier.” Gage returned to his chair. “Let’s give your team a while longer and wrap up this investigation. Elizabeth needs closure.”

Kent picked up the envelope and stuffed the report inside. “Is there anything else you’re not telling me? Were there any threats, unusual phone calls, strangers hanging out at your house or the brewery?”

“No. I would have come to you.” Gage scowled.

“Look, I have to ask.” Kent gave a frustrated sigh. “This girl’s body being found at the river will bring up new questions about Beau’s death and the others. You and Elizabeth should be prepared.”

Gage summoned his restraint, putting on his stony, businesslike face. He still had a job to do—one pounded into him by his father and grandfather. “I appreciate the heads-up.”

“There’s one more thing. Bill said there was another set of bones in the midsection of the girl. She was over eight weeks pregnant. I just wanted to tell you first before others get wind of it and the gossip mill starts.” Kent put on his hat and strolled out of the office.

His reserved cool impressed Gage, but he knew underneath Kent was nervous as hell about another body.

Gage faced the wall of windows. He wanted to make sure the man returned to his patrol car—one of five that Benedict Brewery had donated to the force. He drummed his fingers on the windowsill, waiting for the car to pull out. Once Kent headed down the narrow road, Gage picked up his phone.

After three rings, a gravelly voice came through the cell’s speaker. “Do we have a problem?”

Gage’s attention stayed on the cruiser as it approached the security gate. “No problem. Just a nosy sheriff looking to put a feather in his Stetson. You’re sure your man was thorough at The Abbey?”

“Yep. He gave Beau a head start into the woods and cleaned up the evidence at The Abbey. It was just dumb luck those wild dogs killed the boy on the beach before my guy got to him. There’s no evidence because there was no crime.”

Gage nodded. “That’s what I needed to hear. Thank you again.”

The raspy chuckle was unexpected.

“And I thought I was the cold bastard. You make me look like a pussycat.”

Gage browsed the open folders on his desk. “No one would ever mistake you for that, Joe. Talk soon.”

He hung up and grabbed the closest folder. Gage scanned the information on the brewery’s projected sales for the coming year and liked what he saw. The national campaign introducing Benedict Beer to America was about to hit the ground running. If his accountants even came close to their projections, then everything Gage had done to protect his family would be worth it. He’d saved the brewery and kept the Devereaux name from scandal.

“*If you have a problem, get rid of it.*” His father’s advice rolled through his mind. Whether dealing with enemies, friends, or family, Edward Devereaux had treated everyone with the same contempt—even Gage. He sometimes wondered if Beau’s behavior was the result of all the years he’d been under Edward’s influence. He wanted to blame his father, but deep inside, he knew the boy hadn’t been right. Beau had been born with a venomous force controlling him, and no matter how hard he worked, Gage could not tame it.

There were moments when he missed his son, but the bad times far outweighed the good. He didn’t have to worry anymore—Beau’s evil had vanished forever. He could have more children. If

not with Elizabeth, then someone else. Gage would find a way to carry on the family name, and just like his father had taught him, he would raise his heir to protect the Devereaux legacy at all costs.

The final bell of the day had Leslie scrambling for the door, desperate for fresh air. Her panic had mushroomed as the afternoon progressed. Everywhere she turned, she found herself looking for Dawn. Then the awful truth would stamp out her hope.

She reached her car and calmed a little. For the past few days, she'd searched online about dealing with panic attacks. The information helped, but the pressure constricting her chest today was worse than usual. Leslie wanted to chalk up her heightened agitation to the return to school, but she knew the real cause of her dread—the whisperings.

Everywhere she went, stares from the other students cut into her like razor blades. For a girl who once ignored what people thought of her, this new reality was like a slap in the face. The whispers she did hear were even more upsetting.

"*That's her. The girl whose twin was murdered,*" one freshman remarked to another in front of the lockers.

"*They say her sister haunts The Abbey,*" a student said quietly behind her in class.

The most hurtful of all? "*I heard she hated her sister.*"

She leaned against her car, drained.

"Hey, you okay?"

Zoe Harvey, a close friend of Dawn's, walked up to her. She wore a short, white cheerleading uniform that highlighted her deep brown skin. Seeing the outfit sent a jolt of anguish through Leslie.

Zoe put an arm around her. "You're shaking."

Leslie bristled at the gesture. She straightened and fought to contain her emotions. "I'm having a crappy day, and seeing you in ..." She gestured to Zoe's uniform.

Zoe glanced down at the red St. Benedict High dragon on her chest, and her face fell. "I didn't mean to upset you. I wanted to see how you were holding up."

Leslie waved off her apology and set the book bag on the hood. "I'm just tired."

"Dawn used to always talk about how strong you are." Zoe offered a reassuring smile. "I can see she was right."

Instead of bringing on more grief, Zoe's words comforted her. She and Dawn had battled like archenemies the year before she died, but to hear her sister had expressed something positive during that tumultuous time helped. "Thank you for telling me. She always said I was too stubborn. I never imagined she admired me for anything."

Zoe put her hand on Leslie's shoulder. "She did, very much. Don't ever think she didn't."

Leslie fought back tears as she opened a pocket on the bag to retrieve her keys.

Kelly rushed toward them. "Everything okay?"

The strain in Kelly's voice worsened Leslie's guilt. She needed to get it together. "Fine," she told her.

"I've got to get to practice." Zoe gave Kelly a keep-an-eye-on-her look and hurried away.

"You don't seem *fine* to me." Kelly crossed her arms. "What happened?"

Leslie watched Zoe run across the grassy quad to the athletic field behind the school. The way Dawn had done so many times before. "I saw her cheerleading uniform, and it got to me. I should've been better prepared for that."

"Don't beat yourself up." Kelly brushed a strand of hair from Leslie's face. "No one expects you to bounce back overnight."

Leslie pressed the remote on her keychain and unlocked the doors. "Are you sure you want to

hang out with me? I'm a mess."

"You're the most together person I know." Kelly opened the passenger door. "My mom says scars only cover the surface—they don't change who you are. Give yourself time."

Leslie questioned if her scars hadn't irrevocably erased her identity. A stranger stared back at her in the mirror every morning—one with the same blue eyes and blonde hair as her dead sister. For years, she'd cursed being born identical to Dawn. Now, it was all she had left of her.

Kelly looked at her over the roof of the car. "How about we stop by The Bogue for pizza, and then we can do homework. I have a lot." She grimaced.

Leslie wiped her eyes, feeling foolish. She wasn't the only one suffering. "I guess you have a lot of catching up to do with it being your first day at St. Benedict High."

Kelly eyed the school's quad. "I knew transferring in the middle of the school year wouldn't be easy, but I never expected the drama."

Leslie's stomach rumbled as she considered returning to The Bogue Falaya Café. Everyone would be there, but the sooner she tackled the hurdles of revisiting the places she'd frequented before Dawn's murder, the easier life would be—or so she hoped.

"What is it?" Kelly's voice softened. "Are you worried about running into Derek?"

"I'm sure he won't be at The Bogue. He works after school with his mom at that law firm in Covington."

"Ambitious guy." Kelly raised her eyebrows. "Sounds like a keeper."

Leslie shook her head. "Stop pushing us back together. It's not happening."

"Because you won't let it." Kelly scowled. "You don't have to cut yourself off from Derek to keep us all safe. You know that."

An avalanche of regret stifled a snarky response. A flash of Gage Devereaux sitting at his office desk added to her unease. He'd executed the perfect plan to kill his son, and she'd been his willing accomplice.

Leslie dropped into the driver's seat, undone by the mistakes of her past. *Derek has no idea how ruthless I've become.*