

RIVER OF ASHES

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EXCERPT

Leslie turned off Main Street 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.

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?"

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.”

“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.

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.”

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