

River's Redemption

Chapter One

The nightmare always started the same, with him standing in the doorway to the dark, musty living room of the old ranch-style house. He'd lived there before Wanda and Chet Jennings had come along and adopted him. Before they'd dragged him out of hell and shown him what a parent's love truly meant. Before he'd learned that having an opinion didn't get you a right hook.

Somehow the Jennings had managed to turn him into a human being, despite how hard he'd tried to shove their love into their faces. The only thing River's foster father, Larry Briggs, had taught him was how to hate. He'd learned to bury happiness down so deep that no one, not even River, could feel it. Larry was the sort of monster a child could never imagine unless they came face-to-face with it.

Unfortunately, Larry was adept at fooling people. Everyone thought he was a great guy. He put on a good show for the outside world. Even River's teachers thought Larry was a saint for opening his home and becoming a foster parent. Behind closed doors was a different story, though. He would drop the façade until all that was left was evil. The only good part of those early years was Joey VanAllen, his foster brother. Joey had been ten years old when River had met him, and already the kid was smarter than most adults. Gifted didn't even begin to cover it. The kid with the angelic looks and blond hair was a regular Einstein.

In River's nightmare, it was early morning. Saturday. Larry usually spent the better part of the day sleeping off his typical Friday-night bender. River had gotten up before the sun came over the horizon and sneaked out to spend the morning at his hideout. He went there every Saturday morning, usually with Joey, in an attempt to escape Larry's swinging fists. This time he'd had to go there alone, because Joey had spent the night at a friend's house. The Robinsons were good people. They were kind to Joey and treated him as if he were their own son. People like that were rare, River knew all too well.

No one but Joey knew about his hideout, and he liked it that way. It had saved them on more than one occasion. It was the only place where he and Joey truly felt safe. He'd stayed there a few hours and came back midmorning.

In the all-too-familiar nightmare, River saw himself standing in the living room and staring at the filthy, beer-stained, green recliner that should have held his drunken foster dad. Instead it sat empty. A jolt of fear raced up River's spine. He balled his fists at his sides and took a deep breath in an effort to gain the courage to search out the evil man.

His legs shook as he quietly walked down the narrow hallway, past the filthy room where Larry slept, until he reached the door to his and Joey's room. The door was closed. River frowned. It was never allowed to be closed. Just one of Larry's many rules. As carefully as possible, River reached out and turned the knob, opening the bedroom door by slow degrees. The wider the crack in the doorway, the more he was able to hear sounds coming from within. He heard cries, terrible cries. It made his flesh crawl and his insides turn nauseated. He'd heard that awful sound in his own mind a thousand times.

At ten years old, River had eyes that told of things no boy that age should know. From the outside, he would seem to be an average, if somewhat depressed and introverted, kid. His eyes told a different story. On the inside, River felt lifeless, hollowed out by the misery and depravity inflicted on him by Larry.

He quietly stepped into the room and saw a scene that would be etched into his brain and play out in his nightmares over and over for years to come.

Larry Briggs, in all his evil and maniacal drunkenness, mounted on top of Joey. Bruises marred his foster brother's fair, angelic face and blood slowly trickled out of his mouth, only to go unchecked down the side of his jaw. Joey's eyes, the same blue eyes that once held life and joy, were now vacant. River knew that Joey had retreated into his own private world, where no one could hurt him and all was right with life. The last shred of River's humanity cracked, destroying the little bit of rationality he had clung to for so long. A thick, black hate coated his mind. He had thought that as long as Larry kept away from Joey, it would be okay. River could handle putting up with the abuse, at least until he found the means to escape and take Joey with him. But seeing his sweet and innocent ten-year-old foster brother being treated so cruelly was more than River could take.

Knocking. Loud and persistent. It yanked River out of the nightmare, and he shot upward in bed. Sweat soaked his sheets and hair. His heart raced, and he had to force the nausea down. The memories always made him physically ill. Just once he wished he could sleep in peace. He didn't think one night was too much to ask.

"Christ," he muttered. Another series of thumps came from the front of his apartment. River sat upright and twisted around so he could read the neon-green display on his alarm clock. Five o'clock on a Friday morning? "What the hell?"

He hoped nothing was wrong. His mother's smiling face popped into his head, and a jolt of concern had him fully alert in seconds. Several months back, she'd suffered a mild heart attack, and it had scared River the way nothing else could. She'd recovered, though. Even taken up yoga and started eating healthier. She was out of the woods now, right?

Wanda Jennings meant the world to him. She and his adoptive father had taken River and his four brothers from foster care and given them a home to be proud of and the kind of love River had never before known. Two years ago, a massive stroke had taken his dad away. River still missed hearing the sound of his deep voice and his powerful arms wrapping him up in one of his characteristic bear hugs.

He stood and slipped into a pair of black pajama pants and strode from the room. As he approached the front door, River stopped and looked through the peep hole. Reilly, his twin, stood with his hands in the front pockets of his old, worn jeans, a worried look creasing his brow. Reilly and River were mirror images of each other with their pale green eyes, shaggy black hair and six-foot-four frames. The only difference, most folks would say, was River's constant scowl.

When River saw his brother's customary smile replaced by a frown, his anxiety level ratcheted up a few notches.

"Open up, bright eyes," Reilly called out.

River jerked open the door and let Reilly step around him before he muttered, "It's five in the morning. Something's wrong."

"It's Jeanette," Reilly said as he shoved a hand through his hair.

The name sent River's heart into full throttle. Jeanette had been his closest friend since high school, and she was the only woman who managed to put up with his shit. The thought of losing her brought his nausea back tenfold.

River knew Jeanette had it in her head to take their friendship to a more intimate level. She'd had a crush on him for years. He wasn't blind. And he'd be a lying ass if he didn't admit to feeling a rush of desire for her whenever her name was mentioned. River had fantasized more than once about that lean body and subtle curves. Her sexy, long, dark hair always made him want to reach out and stroke it. The sweet package was only part of the appeal. Jeanette was gutsy and gave as good as she got.

But she was also too innocent. She deserved someone whole, someone who hadn't been to hell and back. Touching her would be wrong on every level. He knew it. He'd tried to make her understand how wrong he was for her, but she'd always refused to listen to reason. Still, River knew better than to fuck up the one good relationship he had going in his life.

"What happened?" he asked as he quickly moved to the kitchen to grab his keys and cell phone off the counter. He mentally prepared himself for the worst.

"She was mugged outside of the Dawg Pit," Reilly replied. "She's okay, nothing broken. Just got banged up a bit. She's more angry than anything, to tell the truth."

"She in the hospital?" River frowned. "And what the hell was she doing at that end of town? There isn't anything but meth labs and felons out that way."

"No, she's at home." Reilly sighed. "And you aren't going to like her reason for being at the Dawg Pit any more than I did."

Reilly and Jeanette had always been close, but lately River had noticed her confiding more and more in Reilly. And it was starting to piss him off. "Spit it out."

"She's working there."

No way could he have heard right. "At the Dawg Pit? What the fuck, Reilly? The place is a dump."

His brother held out both hands. “Hell, I didn’t know either. I just found out tonight. She said she needs the money for college.” He shook his head. “Can you believe that?”

Jeanette was working on a law degree. When she wasn’t in class, she was studying. It was a tough schedule, and River couldn’t be more proud of her.

“Then why didn’t she come to us for money? Or she could’ve worked at the Blackwater if she’d wanted a job. Either is preferable to that shithole.” They would make room for her at the family restaurant they’d all worked so hard to save after their father’s death. Jeanette had only to ask.

“Jeanette has pride in spades,” Reilly replied, bringing River back to the current problem. “No way would she ask for a handout.”

“It’s not a handout,” River grumbled as he headed for the door. “She’s practically family, and she knows it.”

Reilly caught up to him. “If you value your private parts, please don’t tell her you have nothing but brotherly love for her. That’s too cruel, and you know it.”

River ignored him and took hold of the doorknob. Reilly slammed a palm against the wood surface of the door as if to stop him from going to her. He’d have better luck stopping a Mack truck.

“Where are you going?”

“To see Jeanette,” he bit out. “Where else?”

“You can’t.” Reilly’s voice softened. “It’s not even light out yet. Let her sleep before you start lecturing her. She’s had a long night, River.”

River saw red. “And you’ve been right by her side, haven’t you?”

River knew it was guilt that caused his brother to look away. Hell, he knew the look too well. They were twins, after all. “She called me from the police station, needing a ride,” Reilly said. He’d know nothing short of full disclosure would appease River.

The words pierced his heart. “Why didn’t she call me? She can always come to me. She knows that.”

Reilly cleared his throat. “Um, she’s still not over the incident.”

The incident that Reilly referred to had taken place months ago. Jeanette had walked in on River having sex with...Holly, he thought was the woman’s name. A curvy redhead and the exact opposite of Jeanette. They’d been on the couch, naked. Jeanette had used the key he’d given her years ago and let herself in. When she saw the two of them together, she’d lost it. He was a jerk, she’d shouted. She was through being his friend. At first, River had thought Jeanette would get over it. She could never stay mad at him for long. But this time was different. She was pulling away from him more and more every day. He could feel it. The fact that she’d called Reilly after

having been mugged was proof. She'd needed a friend tonight, and she hadn't chosen him. His gut churned at the thought.

River couldn't figure out why Jeanette was still so pissed off about seeing him with another woman. He'd always been very careful to keep his relationship with Jeanette strictly platonic. And even though she'd always had a crush on him, and he'd had some scorching fantasies about her, Jeanette had seemed content to keep it just friends. Sex would screw everything up; he knew it in his bones. But things were changing between them, and River didn't like it.

"I'm not just going to twiddle my thumbs while she's in need," River ground out, hating the sense of helplessness riding him.

"Yes, you are," Reilly said as he headed for the kitchen. "Because right now she needs rest more than anything else. And if you go over there all riled up, rest will be the last thing she gets."

"Fine, but to hell if I'm waiting around until she graces me with her presence. I'll be in my sixties by then." He sighed. "I'll give her until noon; then I'm going over there whether she likes it or not."

"Whatever." Reilly rubbed a palm over his face. "In the meantime, you got any coffee around here? I need it bad. I think I used the last of my energy reserves making the trip over here."

River headed for the cabinet next to the refrigerator and took out a can of Italian roast. "Shouldn't you be sleeping too? And where's your better half and those handsome twin babies of yours?"

"Lucy is where I should be—asleep." A sappy grin spread across his brother's face. "The twins are just now beginning to sleep through the night, so she tries to catch as many Z's as she can."

River felt instantly guilty for keeping his brother from his family. Reilly had met the woman of his dreams. Not long after, she'd ended up pregnant with twin boys. River had never seen his brother so happy and content. He envied him that happiness sometimes. He wondered what it would be like to wake up rested and smiling every day. To have a woman and children who thought you hung the moon. River didn't think that sort of happy-ever-after was in the cards for him.

"Go home, bro. You don't need to stick around."

He snorted. "The minute I leave, you'll be out the door and on your way to Jeanette's apartment, and we both know it."

Truer words were never spoken. As he put the coffee on, River watched his brother slump into a chair at the table. He'd been up all night, and he was exhausted. Reilly had been doing River's job, taking care of Jeanette. Even though it stuck in his craw to have his brother doing what he so badly ached to do, he was glad Jeanette hadn't been alone. She would never be alone, not as long as he drew breath.

Back when Jeanette first started college, her parents had been in a horrible car accident. A drunk driver had plowed into them at an intersection. She'd lost them both in one nasty twist of fate, and she'd been on her own ever since.

For weeks afterward, Jeanette had slept in his bed. It'd broken his heart to see her in such pain. He never wanted to see her that way again. His heart couldn't take it.

“Since you plan to babysit me, then, I suppose I could rustle up some breakfast.”

Reilly perked up at the mention of food. “If you weren't my twin, I'd kiss you, tongue and all.”

River shook his head and glanced at the clock on the stove. It was nearly six now. Seven hours until he could see her and know for himself that she was okay. Ah hell, it was going to be a long-ass day.

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