



Beastly

House

A CUPID/ARCHER MYSTERY

JONI GREEN

Beastly House
By Joni Green



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To Jay.
All my love.

Note from the Author

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Chapter 1

The stench of Death was unbearable. Rotting corpses turned to soup under a merciless sun. Flies fattened with abandon on a feast of filth, swarming in a frenzy of activity like peasants at the king's banquet table. The smell of excrement from the dying, purging themselves of their last meal, should have scorched his nostrils, but he did not have time to notice.

The constant barrage of shells from the enemy made it impossible to hear what the soldier beside him was saying, if the soldier beside him roused himself to say anything at all.

Grim hopelessness lived in the trenches with the war-weary soldiers. In the No Man's Land between the Germans and the Allies, there lay an impossible tangle of barbed wire and pitted earth. He was doomed inside this inner ring of hell.

A corpse arose from the muck, his shallow, metal helmet cocked sideways on his head. Both eyeballs lay on withered cheeks, dangling and sightless, swinging from black-veined ropes like two dripping baubles with cloudy lenses in the corrupt air. Ribbons of flesh fell from the blackened palms that lifted to a godless sky. An evil grin spread across the ghastly, blue face, and then, the soldier heard the screeching voice from the jaws of Gehenna gleefully screech, "Gas! Gas! Gas!"

He awoke screaming, drenched in sweat.

* * * * *

The B.S.T. Leigh House sat on the edge of a large lake, dour and grand, and planted on its foundation as firmly as if it had existed there for a thousand years. The one hundred and sixty room, three-story mansion, cottages, and outbuildings were constructed in the Mediterranean style, and they would have looked more at home in Florida where new oceanfront estates were being erected faster than bacon fat pops in a hot skillet. But still, the massive house looked impressive, and smugly superior, as it sat beside the dark, azure waters of Lake Winston.

The apricot stucco façade, topped with brown terracotta roof tiles, needed only a few palm trees to complete the vision, but no well-bred palms would ever deign to survive the colder climates of New England. So, the architect artfully utilized what he had at his disposal to lend an exotic ambiance—arched windows, curved balconies, and imported fountains. All of it substituted for the absence of a tropical locale.

Somehow, he had been successful, for there was something mystical and foreign about the estate, an oddity that the original owner had found enchanting.

B.S.T. Leigh House took its name from the family who first inhabited it: Bernard, Syble, and Therese, Bernard's step-daughter. Therese was dead and so was Bernard. The widow Syble found no happiness in the place. It was filled with too many ghosts.

Syble sold the estate to a group of buyers, who immediately opened an exclusive sanitarium for wealthy socialites looking for a place to hideout, dry out, or ride out some storm in their lives. Mrs. Leigh boarded her private Pullman car and rode the rails south to another mansion, somewhat smaller and easier to maintain.

The sanitarium had been operating for five years. The exclusive jitter joint was jokingly referred to as 'Beastly House' by both staff and patients and that was the name that stuck to it like gum to the bottom of a shoe.

Across the vast, shimmering midnight-blue waters of Lake Winston stood several newly-built mansions, evidence of the nouveau riche flaunting their recently acquired wealth. The newcomers were trying mightily to rise to the status long enjoyed by the old-money families of the area. Those who had lived there for several generations scoffed at such audacious displays suddenly cropping up along *their* waterfront and looked down their noses at their second-class cousins, so conspicuously trying to claw their way to the top rung.

It was one thing for old money to fly in the face of the common man, but when coarse upstarts did it, the whole drama took on the look of a New Orleans madam dressed in minks, diamonds, and pearls sitting in a box seat at the opera, reeking of cheap toilet water and hurling obscenities at the mezzo-soprano.

The year was 1920. The war was over, and it was time to enjoy life.

Dolls and dames were throwing away their corsets and finally living. Religious fanatics were proclaiming the country was going to ruin. Political fanatics were mailing bombs to the rich and powerful. Anarchists and communists were terrorizing America.

It was the Jazz Age, the post-war period, the era when women were chafing at the bit and testing their wings. Hemlines were rising. Everyone was smoking cigarettes, reefers, and opium and nothing seemed too far out of reach.

A sleek Duesenberg breezer was parked in a clearing, near one of the paths carved out of the woods by the wagon wheels of generations past. Avery Brighton stumbled upon the convertible as she walked aimlessly through the woods.

The cloth top was down.

A young couple was necking.

The pale, blonde wisp was dressed in Voile, ribbons, and lace. She looked deceptively innocent, save for the fact she was biting the earlobe of the young man in the car.

The young man had a movie star's profile. His skin was unblemished, except for the smear of red lipstick across his cheek. His hair was a thick mop, disheveled and sparkling, and glints of sunlight filtered through the leaves and lit the scene.

His scarlet tie was haphazardly tossed over his shoulder, collar skewed and wrinkled. His jacket was rumpled. Blue Serge smiled, whispering into the washed-out blonde's ear.

Suddenly, the blonde slapped his face with the heated violence of a woman scorned. She got out of the small roadster and stomped down the dirt path, as indignant as a prim granny warming a proud pew on a sunny morning who has just been notified she must relinquish her seat for the town drunk.

Blue Serge sat in the car, his brown eyes sparkling. He threw his head back in laughter, revealing a perfect set of gleaming, white teeth.

"I say," Avery said, walking up to the sleek chariot, "that was a nice move. She packs a wallop to be so scrawny. Did you really mean what you said? What on earth did you say to her, anyway? She was madder than an old wet hen!"

You suggested a little barneymugging, didn't you? Come on. Be honest."

The blonde, still within hearing distance, stopped in her tracks. She turned to look at Avery, standing beside the automobile.

“Crazy lunatic! How dare you speak of us like that! Easton! Do something! I will not stand by and be so crudely insulted!”

Blondie screamed her indignation at Avery, who thought the whole scene deliciously wicked. Easton, who had exited his roadster, stood by the car smiling.

Blonde Voile looked as if she wanted to spit on both of them, her eyes flaming with rage. She grunted her disapproval, resuming her stiff, marching stride, and headed down the dirt path in the opposite direction.

The young man’s eyes held Avery’s. He looked her over, head to toe.

“You really are one of the crazies from that asylum, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Avery said. “*Nervous invalids*. That’s the phrase they like to use to describe us. At least in our presence. But to be honest, most of us are merely high strung hypochondriacs whose families have closeted us away here for what they say is ‘a little rest.’ A *little rest* that will probably last us the rest of our natural lives.”

“I see,” Blue Serge said.

“You see what?” Avery asked.

“Bit of a pain. Certainly an inconvenience. Embarrassment, maybe. If your family has the dough, then out the door you go. Something like that, though, I’m just guessing.”

Avery smiled.

“But I bet I’m not far off,” Easton said. “You know, an unpleasantness that somebody else can handle.”

“Yes. I think that about sums it up,” Avery said, after some reflection.

“What’d you do? Commit murder or something?”

“No. Nothing that wild or insanely horrendous,” Avery said. “Just have sticky fingers. I’m a booster. A klepto. My family’s faux pas.”

“Fascinating.”

“You think so? I really don’t know why I do it, but at times, I’m overwhelmed by the compulsion. Do you really find this fascinating?”

“No. I was just making conversation.”

“You’re not shocked?”

“Why should I be? So, you’re a thief. A shoplifter. So what! Probably steal just for the thrill. I dunno. Me? I like to drive fast. Father says my speeding will give him a stroke. But I like the way it makes me feel. Alive, you know. So, I’ll keep doing it until I wrap my pretty little automobile around a tree.

Nobody’s perfect.

You’re here at this place. You dress nice. Look like the cat’s meow. So, my guess is, you don’t steal to eat or anything like that.”

“You’re right. I could get my father to give me anything I want. All I have to do is ask.”

“I’ll bet that’s true. But you don’t ask. Why? Who knows? Probably just more fun to see if you can pocket a little bauble and get away with it.”

“You should be my doctor!”

“Nah. That job’s already taken, I’m sure. Besides, I got other plans for my life.”

“Don’t blame you one bit,” Avery said, laughing. “I wouldn’t want to be stuck here nursemaiding the bunch I am currently stuck with! Besides, as soon as Daddy cools

off, I plan to plead with him to let me come back home. I'll promise him I'll be good. And I will be. If only for a little while."

"Wanna butt?" Easton asked, offering her a cigarette from his solid gold cigarette case.

Avery thought he had the most gorgeous eyes.

"What," he said, a wicked grin on his face, "don't they let you crazies smoke?"

"Oh, they let us crazies do most anything we want," she said.

She took the cigarette.

"Thank you," she said, accepting a light from his already lit cigarette.

"Gaspers are bad for you," he said, his eyes crinkled in a cheerful way.

"Isn't just about everything," she said.

They smoked in silence.

"I mean," she said, "isn't just about anything that's really any good *terribly* bad for you?"

"Yes," he said, letting the smoke burn deeply into his lungs. "I guess so. Say, aren't you a little far from . . . home?"

"Yes, but don't worry. There isn't anywhere to escape *to*," Avery said. "You'd need supplies to survive a trek off this estate. It's fantastically large. As you can see, I've only the clothes on my back. No water. No food. I'm not planning to break out and go on a rampage."

She smiled at her little joke.

"Mmmm," he said. "My family hates the fact that this place is here. I'm forever reminding them that *we're* the tourists. The locals were here ages before we came along.

They don't buy it, though. My argument, I mean."

"Oh, there's really nothing to worry about," Avery said. "Truly. Not from this loony bin, I mean. The lake is quite large and deep and very cold. Even in the summer. There are hundreds of acres on this estate. That's why they let us roam the woods. We can walk for hours and never leave the property."

"But what if you become lost in all this forest? I mean . . ."

"Oh, never fear," she said. "There's a bloodhound that will lead them right to the little lost lamb. I would be promptly escorted back *home* in no time."

"Bloodhound. Really?"

"Yes. Really. One of the amenities that sold my folks on this place. Tracking dogs, just like in the old days of slavery."

"Still use them for the chain gangs, I think," he said.

"Good comparison," Avery said. "Chain gangs and loony-bin crazies."

"Are you really serious?"

"No. I am fibbing. There are no dogs. Another bad habit of mine. Anyway, I was truthful about one thing. There is nowhere to run. This place is too damn big," Avery said.

"You want a lift back?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather walk. I treasure my time outside. It's supposed to be therapeutic. Or so they say. Me? I just enjoy exploring. Besides, you never know what you'll see. Or who you will run into! Ha! Ha!"

“Suit yourself. Are you sure? Alright, but don’t say that I didn’t offer,” he said, cranking the car. “By the way, thanks to Shelly, you know my name’s Easton. What’s yours?”

“Avery.”

“Well, Avery, perhaps, if I am lucky, I’ll run into you again, soon.”

“Perhaps,” Avery said, giving Easton one of her most bewitching smiles.

He put the car into gear and sped off down the dirt path. Avery watched him, a smile still lingering on her lips.

“Easton,” she said, “perhaps, we *will* meet again soon.”

Chapter 2

“Flix, you say?” asked the well-dressed lady. “What a positively outlandish name. I mean no offense, Mr. Flix, but really, isn’t that the kind of moniker that should be headlining a comic strip or a vaudeville act?”

“No offense taken, madam. I could not agree with you more. But it is my real name, and I must carry it with me, like an albatross about my neck, until I meet my Maker. And beyond, I suppose. I am one of those poor souls whose name brings, if not a belly laugh, then a discreet smile, when it is proclaimed loudly across a crowded room.

You may simply call me Flix if you wish.”

The man was small, slight of build, but with an enormously rich head of salt-and-pepper hair, cropped and neatly trimmed, and a mustache that lent its wearer a look of worldly sophistication. He had piercing, dark eyes that were quick and intelligent.

He was wearing a linen suit, ivory in color, and a maroon silk bow tie. His shoes were black and charcoal wingtips. His crisp white shirt showed no sign of a wrinkle. The crease in his pants was so defined that it looked as if it would slice your finger. An aura of obsessive neatness surrounded him. He was a walking advertisement for the modern male.

“Well, if I may be so forward as to ask, what is your full name, Mister Flix? Excuse me. I mean Flix.”

“Florian Valentine, madam. But my mother called me, Golden.”

With that, the poor woman lost all control. She laughed heartily, in spite of herself.

“Oh, Flix. Please forgive me. I am sorry. I really do not know what came over me. It must be my nerves.”

“Oh. Think nothing of it, madam. I often get such a response whenever I reveal my given name. I am quite used to it. But I am sorry to hear you have a nervous condition.”

“Oh, yes, Flix. That is why I am here. To rest them, you know. My nerves.

At home, it seemed as if any little thing just set me off. I am so edgy. So . . . I don’t know how to describe how I feel. *Jumpy*. Perhaps that is the word that describes me, nowadays.

My husband recently passed.”

“Oh, I am so sorry.”

“No need to be. Just a fact of life. But I felt that a vacation would help. My lawyer suggested a stay here. Why in the world he recommended this place, instead of the South of France, is a mystery to me. But he handles my affairs, and I trust him implicitly. So, I agreed to come.”

“Well, Mrs. Hood, the scenery is very beautiful, wouldn’t you agree? The accommodations are first-rate.”

“Yes, I quite agree. The views are spectacular, if you like that sort of thing.”

“And the air is so unlike the city. Fresh and clean. It is why I have come here, for a respite.”

“Oh, good heavens! You are not one of those lungers, are you? I mean, when I signed myself into this place, I did it because I didn’t think they allowed hackers here!”

“Oh no. No, dear lady. Do not trouble yourself over such matters. I do not have tuberculosis. Nothing like that, I assure you.

I don't know what you would call what I have. Malaise? I am just not quite myself. Perhaps, it is nothing more than an acute case of laziness. I am joking, of course, Mrs. Hood.

I am here to rest. To recharge. To breathe the fresh air and to allow the sunshine and Mother Nature's beauty to heal my weary body.”

“Bad nerves, too, Flix?”

“That is as good an explanation as any, I suppose, Mrs. Hood.

I do not have those illustrious M.D. letters following my name. My doctor said this place would be beneficial for me. So, I believe it is in my best interest to take the physician's advice. Don't you?”

“If I could find a doctor who is worth his fee, I most certainly would.”

“Besides, the greenhouses on this property are most excellent. I will be able to lose myself in them, I am happy to say. And a commune with Nature may possess the healing qualities that medicine does not, don't you agree?” Flix asked.

“I suppose so.”

“I feel recharged, already, Mrs. Hood. And that is good.”

“How grand!” Mrs. Hood exclaimed. “Well, then, we shall *recharge* together. I am so glad that I have met you, Flix. One feels such a stranger in a new place, you know.”

“Quite so, Mrs. Hood. But now, I must excuse myself. I was promised a tour of the East Greenhouse by the head gardener here, a Mr. Emil Jannins, I believe, and I must not keep him waiting.”

“Oh, of course. Of course. Perhaps, we shall meet later up top!”

“Up top?”

“Why, yes, Flix. I hear they have the most marvelous sun patio on the roof. We can bake and broil and cook our pale skin to our heart's content.”

Flix had no intention of broiling himself like a lobster, but he did not want to hurt Mrs. Hood's feelings.

“Perhaps, madam. Perhaps. One never knows just what will evolve as the day unfolds.”

“Yes. That's so true, sir. Good day, then.”

“And to you, Mrs. Hood.”

Chapter 3

"I don't see why we *all* have to eat here in the dining room together at the same table!" Avery complained. "It is so horrible. I feel just like a pig who is led to the trough to slop with the whole drove! The outer house is never here! Why do I have to be here? Dr. Quintland says that it is fine if I dine alone."

"Oh, you little liar. He says no such thing," Abercrombie Wolcott said.

"Why, of course, he does. I am one of his favorites. It's my reward for being good."

"Good, my Aunt Betsy's bottom."

"Oh, applesauce! Mr. Know-It-All," Avery said, placing a cigarette in her holder. "This place bores me to tears. I don't think I can stand it much longer! Abercrombie, you bindlestiff! You bore me, too! Hop a train and hobo to another room! Mind-numbing boob!"

Avery was sitting on a low bench beside the dining room fireplace. Her legs were crossed, one hand on her hip, wrist slightly curved, her elegant fingers emphasizing the tiny waist beneath them; her other hand lovingly fondled an extremely long cigarette holder crafted from an exotic, highly decorative material. Her shining, ruby lips puckered in an exaggerated pout, drawing the holder further into her mouth. Her dark, short hair exaggerated her pale, flawless skin.

She hiked a shin over one knee, throwing the hemline of her above-the-knee dress dangerously high and showing quite a bit of thigh and silk black stocking. Her eyes, darkly lined with makeup, stared brazenly out at all in the room, daring anyone to say anything to her.

"Oh, goodness! Avery! Please behave, dear. I want to enjoy my meal," someone said.

"Oh, Avery! You know the *real* lunatics live in the outer cottage. That crowd would never be permitted to eat with us. I hear them screaming, sometimes. At least, I think I do. You know, when the wind is right. Heh. Heh.

But, what was I talking about? Oh! I know," Abercrombie Wolcott said with a flourish of his hand, "you are constantly unhappy. It is always something with you. Finish your cigarette. And be a good sport. If I can be a good boy, you can be a good girl. I wish to eat, but that won't happen until we are all present and accounted for at the table."

Wolcott unfurled his napkin with a wave of his wrist and floated it neatly to his lap.

"Why can't you just sit down and enjoy your meal like the rest of us?" said another.

"Because," Avery said testily, "I want to eat out in the tennis pavilion."

"Tennis pavilion? Got a little match play this evening, eh, Avery?" George asked.

"Oh, close your head, Crupple Man. I simply enjoy the view," Avery said.

"My dear girl, the only view you enjoy is populated with males beating their chests, scraping at the earth with their hooves, and parading their masculinity before you like willing sacrifices before your altar! Be a chum! Spill your guts! Tell us who you are meeting at the pavilion, won't you?"

Wolcott slammed down his fork, thought better of this action, cleared his throat, and exclaimed, "Let us talk of other things. What? What shall we talk about? Oh, I know. The headlines! There was a bombing on Wall Street, today. Nasty thing! Most horrible! Anarchist, most likely."

"What is this world coming to?" someone near the end of the table interjected.

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Abercrombie! Do you really think that is an appropriate subject to discuss while eating?" Avery screamed. "I told you to stuff a sock in it before I give you the bum's rush!"

"Please, children! Let's play nice. We're all under the same roof."

There was an audible rustle as the door of the dining room swung open.

"Well," said Mrs. Hood, entering late as usual, "I see that we are all here."

"Yes, we're here on time, Mrs. Hood. You know it's the doctor's rule that no meal is served until everyone is seated," Avery said testily. "I made it back from my walk on time."

"Excuse me, Avery," Mrs. Hood said airily.

"A pox on the doctor's rules," George muttered under his breath. "Trouble in the lady's room again, Mrs. Hood?"

Mr. Clive Birmingham-Hill looked angrily at everyone at the table, refusing to speak a word. He was a round man, with spectacles that he kept propped on the end of his nose for the sole purpose of looking down at anyone who crossed his field of vision.

"Let me introduce you all to our latest arrival," Mrs. Hood said, breezily, ignoring the ill crew about her. "This is Mr. F. V. Flix.

He is here for a little respite, like most of us, and I am sure that you will all make him feel very welcome," she said with gusty enthusiasm, entirely too exaggerated for the situation.

"Lunch is served," a servant announced.

"Oh good!" said Mrs. Hood. "I'm sure we're all starved!"

"I'll just bet you are! The notoriety of your peculiar appetites precedes you, madam," muttered George.

"George!" echoed a voice across the table.

Mr. Birmingham-Hill looked like he was going to faint.

George could not help but grin maliciously.

Chapter 4

“Hello, Mrs. Hood,” Flix said.

There was a lull in the afternoon. No activities had been scheduled. Flix was sitting in the shade of a very large tree, taking advantage of any hint of breeze that might waft across the lawn.

“There you are! I am trying to get a game of bridge together. Flix, are you in?”

“Bridge? Oh, madam, I am afraid I do not know how to play. Thank you, but I must decline. My interest has always been in other things. My work, I am afraid. It is all consuming. No time for games.”

“There is always time for games! What kind of work do you do? It must be very backbreaking, common labor, or you must be employed by a very hard taskmaster. Do tell me what interests you so that you have no time for cards.”

“Lepidoptery.”

“Oh, Flix, that sounds positively evil. Perhaps, I should try it.”

“I assure you, there is nothing evil involved.

My life’s work is studying butterflies and moths. In particular, I am studying the white-lined sphinx moth. It is a fascinating creature, able to hover over the blossoms of delicate flowers. It sips nectar with a long curled tube at its mouth called a proboscis. Because of its ability to hover above the blossoms, it is often mistaken for a hummingbird. Thus, it is known as the hummingbird moth.

Its wingspan is quite large. And its body is thick. I can see how it could easily be mistaken for a hummingbird.”

“Totally underwhelming. Lepi. . . .”

Mrs. Hood’s tongue simply refused to wrap itself around so many syllables. Why, to her, the very word seemed uncivilized.

“Oh, but it is not, Mrs. Hood. Those creatures are as varied and as interesting as humans. I assure you. We can learn so much from Nature, if we will but open our eyes and observe.

And I am also enthralled by the plants of this world. So many. So varied.”

“How on earth could such boring subjects take up all your time? You’ll never get a floozy to love you troozy with such tedious hobbies! A chippy wants to hear sweet nothings whispered in her ear. Not a lecture on bed bugs and stink weeds!”

This last remark came from George, who was being pushed passed the two in a wheelchair by a sparkling, white-clad orderly.

“George!” Mrs. Hood pleaded. “Please. You can be so appalling!”

George was laughing gleefully. He loved nothing better than to stir Mrs. Hood’s dander.

“Oh, Little Red Riding Hood-Hoodle-Whoo! Don’t let the needle whet your wheedle. Doodle-doo! Ha! Ha!”

“Sorry, sir. Excuse us, madam,” mumbled the orderly.

“Your friend has quite a unique way with phrases, Mrs. Hood,” Flix said.

“Oh, George is no friend of mine, I can assure you. I mean, they say he is a war hero, but there’s hardly anything heroic about him!

Look at him! Poor creature. Stuck in that chair.

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