



## The Devil's Footprints

By Amanda Stevens

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Years after her sister's unsolved murder, New Orleans tattoo artist Sarah DeLaune is haunted by the mysteries of her past. Sarah has always believed that her sister was killed by a man named Ashe Cain. But no one else had ever seen Ashe. He had "appeared" to Sarah when she needed a friend the most, only to vanish on the night of her sister's murder. The past bleeds into the present when two mutilated bodies are found near Sarah's home, the crime scene desecrated by cloven footprints.

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## **The Devil's Footprints By Amanda Stevens Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Amanda Stevens likes to write about the dusty back roads and murky bayous of the South where she grew up. To learn more about her novels, please visit [www.amandastevens.com](http://www.amandastevens.com).

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She had no idea he was there.

Seated on the porch steps of the old Duncan farmhouse, the girl remained blissfully unaware of his vigil. If she had turned she would have seen him, but she didn't turn. Instead, she pulled her jacket more tightly around her slight body, as if stricken by a sudden chill.

In the distance, the ancient bells up in the cottonwoods tinkled in the shifting twilight. Ghost music, he thought. A serenade for the dead.

He listened for a moment, eyes closed, anticipation strumming the nerve endings along his spine. Then he crept a few steps closer.

And still she heard nothing.

Not surprising. He'd learned a long time ago the importance of a silent approach. No squeaking shoes. No snapping twigs. Not even an exhaled breath. He moved like a shadow, like a stealthy predator bearing down with eagle-eyed precision on his prey.

Her head suddenly lifted, as if yanked by the invisible bond that connected them, and he froze, heart hammering, until the danger passed.

She settled back to her daydreaming as her dog played nearby in the tall grass. Her back was to him; he longed to call out her name, make her turn so he could glimpse her face, stare deeply into those dark, dark eyes.

A shiver coursed through him. He wanted that contact more than anything in the world, but it couldn't be today. It would be night soon, and the longer he stayed out, the harder it became to control his natural urges. The demons driving him sometimes made him careless and greedy and all too willing to risk everything he needed to keep hidden.

But for her, it might be worth it.

Outwardly, she looked like a normal girl. Straight dark hair with a fringe of bangs across her forehead. Pale skin. Deep brown eyes. Nothing at all extraordinary about her appearance.

On the inside, though, where it counted the most, Sarah DeLaune was anything but normal.

She was young, only thirteen, so he had to be very careful with her. He was older, wiser and—in some ways—worldlier, although he could shed his dreary veneer as easily as peeling away the Goth persona he'd adopted. Unlike normal-looking Sarah, he had embraced the trappings of darkness, because without the black clothes and heavy makeup, he became someone else.

"Gabriel, you leave that squirrel alone. You hear me?" she scolded her dog. "Don't make me cut a switch!"

He smiled at the idle threat. Sarah would never harm a hair on that mutt's head. Until now, Gabriel had been her only companion. Until now.

The dog trotted over to the steps, and Sarah cupped his homely face in her hands, scratched behind his shapeless ears. Gabriel started to flop at her feet worshiping her, but a change of wind brought a new scent, a new excitement, and the dog whirled, his keen eyes searching the shadows at the corner of the house.

He started to step back out of sight, but it was too late. He'd gotten careless and now he'd been spotted.

As Gabriel bounded toward him, he reached into his pocket and snagged one of the treats he kept in a plastic bag. He'd learned early on that Sarah's dog had a weakness for bacon.

Skidding to a halt, the ugly mutt sniffed his hand, then greedily gobbled the morsel right from his palm. He dug out another, his gaze never leaving Sarah.

She'd risen from the steps and stood looking at him as if she didn't quite know what to do. Her instincts told her to run, but her curiosity urged her to stay. For a girl like Sarah, there really was no choice.

Slowly, she walked through the dead weeds toward the corner of the house, peering into the shadows.

He drew several quick breaths as he watched her. He'd been in her house on any number of occasions when the family was out. He'd drifted through the silent rooms, touched her things, absorbed her scent. He knew her so well by now. Her habits, her secrets, her innermost fears. Sometimes, it almost seemed as if she he'd never before been this close to her.

A quiver of excitement vibrated through him as their eyes met for the first time. In that instant, he could feel her gaze penetrating the darkest recesses of his soul, probing the deepest corners of his mind, the way he'd searched every crevice of her room.

"Hey, you!" she called. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The intensity of her focus disconcerted him and he had to glance away as she approached. "I just wanted to have a look around. I didn't think anyone would be here this time of day."

"Well, you thought wrong." She gave him a scowling appraisal. "Who are you anyway? I've never seen you out here before."

"My name is Ashe Cain," he said, careful to remain in the shadows where she couldn't get a good look at him.

"Never heard of you, and I know everyone in town."

"I'm not from Adamant."

That caught her interest. "Where you from then?"

"Does it matter? I'm not trespassing, am I?"

"Yeah, but nobody gives a shit about this place." She cocked her head as she continued to study him, apparently not the least bit afraid. He should have had more faith, he realized.

"Ashe Cain." She repeated his name slowly, as if testing the feel of the syllables against her lips. "Is that your real name or did you just make it up?"

The question startled him. "No, it's my real name. Why?"

"Because all the Goth kids at my school give themselves lame-ass names like Twilight and Shadow." She paused with a mocking smile. "And Ashe."

He scoffed at her suggestion. "Don't lump me in with those poseurs. I'm not like that."

"Why'd you come out here then?" She nodded toward the old farmhouse behind him. "This is their hangout."

"I came to see the footprints."

Something darted through her eyes before she gave a derisive laugh. "That's just a stupid legend. The footprints don't really exist."

"Are you sure?"

She scratched the back of her knee. "I've been out here lots of times and I've never seen them."

"Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it's not real. Besides, I have seen them."

"You've seen the footprints? Where?"

"I can show you if you want."

A gust of wind ruffled her dark hair, the same breeze that stirred the bells in the distance. For the first time, he sensed her hesitancy. Not from fear, exactly, but from an instinctive resistance that would have to be slowly and carefully chipped away.

That same thrill of anticipation soared up his spine, and he turned his head so she wouldn't see his smile.

She thrust her hands into her jacket pockets. "Even if I believed you, which I don't, I have to get home. My old man hates it when I'm late for dinner."

"I hope you're not leaving on my account. You don't have to be afraid of me. I would never hurt you."

Her head shot up. "Do I look afraid? Please. Besides, you even think about laying a hand on me, my dog will kick your Emo ass."

He glanced down at the complacent mongrel at her side. "I can see that."

"He's a lot meaner than he looks," she warned.

He knelt and held out his hand, and Gabriel came over to sniff for more bacon. "Nah, he likes me. Don't you, boy? Good dog," he crooned, burying his hand in the soft fur. "I used to have a dog just like this. Maybe they came from the same litter."

The notion seemed to intrigue her. "Gabriel just showed up at my house one day. I always wondered where he came from." She paused as an unwelcome thought struck her. "You're not going to claim your dog ran away or something, are you?"

"No, he died. Someone poisoned him."

"On purpose? Man, that bites." She dropped to the grass beside Gabriel, dinnertime and her earlier reticence forgotten. "What kind of psycho would do something like that to a poor, helpless animal?"

"Someone evil," he said. "Someone without a soul." Their gazes met and he saw her shiver. "My sister keeps bugging my folks to get rid of Gabriel. She hates him."

"Are they going to?"

"Probably. My dad takes her side every damn time. They both make me sick."

Her anger caused his heart to beat even harder. He had to take a couple of breaths to curtail his excitement.

Sarah wrapped her arms around Gabriel and gave him a squeeze. "They'll be sorry, though, won't they, boy?"

"What are you going to do?"

She lifted her thin shoulders. "I don't know yet, but I'll think of something."

"Maybe I can help you."

Her expression turned suspicious. "Why would you do that?"

"Because that's what friends do. They help each other out."

"News flash, retard. We're not friends. You don't even know me."

Oh, but I do, Sarah. Still he had to be careful, not push too hard.

"And anyway, I don't need your help and I don't want any friends. Gabriel is all I need." Her tone was harsh and defiant, but he, and only he, could see the bereft shadow in her eyes.

His chest tightened; he knew that pain so well. They were so much alike, he and Sarah. Dark, sad, lonely. Her solitude drew him like a newborn baby grasping for its mother's breast.

She scrambled to her feet and dusted off the seat of her jeans. "Hey, I'm sorry I called you a retard."

He smiled. "That's okay."

"No, it's not. I hate when people call me that."

"Who calls you that?"

She answered with a shrug. If she noticed the edge in his voice, she didn't let on. "Are you coming back out here tomorrow?"

"I will if you want me to."

"Like I care one way or the other. I was just asking." But that was a lie. She did care. Whether she knew it or not, she needed him as much as he needed her. She'd come back tomorrow, because she wouldn't be able to help herself.

Sitting cross-legged in the grass, he watched her cut across the edge of the field toward the road, Gabriel at her heels. The air chilled as the twilight deepened, and he knew he needed to be on his way, too. The voices inside his head were getting more desperate by the moment. He was out of time. He couldn't ignore them any longer.

He rose and stood listening to the bells pealing in the distance. Death music. He smiled. A serenade for the doomed.

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