

Chapter One

Lei Zhang had never trusted the woods. Not from the first time her parents dragged her on a camping trip when she was seven in an effort to do what *normal* people did. Certainly not now, when she knew all too well what the evil forests were capable of hiding. The trees had a way of closing a person off from the rest of the world, even a few hundred yards from a well-traveled road. Out here, one could almost believe their actions didn't have consequences—that nothing they did would ever be discovered.

Secrets. The forest is full of secrets.

It was her job to help uncover those secrets.

Penance, some called it. Lei just called it her job—her purpose.

She forced herself to drag her attention away from the lake her German Shepherd–Great Pyrenees mix, Saul, had led her to. He'd found something, which meant it was time for his reward. Saul was smarter than any dog had a right to be, but that didn't mean he cared about the conflicting feelings that rose in her with every search they did.

A successful search meant there was a body at the end of it.

She crouched down and stroked Saul's dark fur. "You did good, boy." Because of him and Lei, there would be a family who got closure. She didn't have to wait to see what the divers would find to know that. Saul was never wrong.

Lei, on the other hand, was wrong far too often.

Not this time.

She threw the ball for him, the joyous wiggle his big body gave lightened her mood a little bit. It didn't quite make her forget the divers slipping into the water or the uneasy murmur of the cops gathered on the shoreline, but her search was over. Right now, her only priority was rewarding her dog for a job well done. He didn't care that a successful hunt meant someone had been brutally murdered and had their body dumped. For Saul, the joy was the search—and playing with his ball afterward.

He dropped the bright-red globe at her feet and turned in a quick circle, a doggy grin on his face. Lei picked it up and tossed it again, careful to aim well away from the lake and the path she and Saul had taken here.

Evidence.

Technically, she could leave at any time—her report would be filed later—but she needed to confirm they brought up a body. Needed to know the job was fulfilled. Needed to bear witness.

Sometimes it felt like she'd been bearing witness for twelve long years, ever since she opened that window . . .

Saul whined, and Lei gave herself a sharp shake. "You're right. No use thinking about that. Not now." Not when they had a hike back down the trail ahead of them. It would take less time to hike out than it had to hike in because Saul wasn't tracking.

The sheriff strode over, looking ten years older than when he'd initially contacted Lei for her help. He yanked off his wide-brimmed hat and scrubbed a hand over his thinning gray hair. "That girl deserved better than this."

"They always do."

He frowned at her, as if trying to decide if she was joking. Seeming satisfied she wasn't out of line, he hooked his fingers into a belt almost hidden by his overflowing stomach and huffed out a strained laugh. "Figure you're used to it by now, huh?"

Lei tensed. It never failed; someone always brought up her past during these searches. Cops had long memories, longer by far than the even more dogged media cycle or true-crime fan. She worked hard to ensure that the legacy she left behind wasn't that of a victim. It seemed like every time she turned around, she faced down some mention of the night her life took a hard right turn into a nightmare there was no escaping.

But she *had* escaped.

She hadn't let that bastard win. She hadn't curled up in a ball and let life go on without her, or slipped into a drugged haze and become a living zombie. She *lived*.

She was a goddamn survivor.

But then the sheriff's words processed and she forced herself to relax. *He's not talking about that past. He's talking about Saul.* "It is what we do." Find the lost ones. Give closure. Do their part to battle the evil that seemed to crop up in the most unexpected places.

Like a cute fraternity boy . . .

Stop it.

He replaced his hat, still looking uneasy. "You're going to want to head back to the road. It'll be dark before long."

She ignored that. Cops usually fell into two camps when it came to cadaver dogs: they saw the search team as a tool to be used, or they considered the dog damn near a miracle worker. Sheriff Joffrey fell into the latter category, though he'd probably label it witchcraft before he went with something as benign as a miracle.

Lei picked up the ball Saul dropped and threw it again, though not as far this time. "How long will the divers take?"

"Hard to say." He cast a sorrowful look at the lake. "It's not particularly deep, but the currents run a little funny—or so my men say. The search area is a little wider than they expected."

The unnamed little lake sat smack-dab in the middle of Colville National Forest. Murderers always thought they were so clever, hauling bodies into national forests and burying them or tossing them into lakes like this one. And sometimes that was even true.

There weren't that many cadaver dogs out there, when all was said and done. Not nearly enough to make up for the sheer number of bodies. Especially when some police departments weren't keen on bringing them in.

Saul came bounding back with his ball, and Lei slipped it into her pack and patted his head. "We'll wait."

He hesitated. "Suit yourself."

It took longer than she would have liked. Several hours went by before the signal went up that they'd found something.

She forced her body to relax, banishing the tension from her fingertips to her tight shoulders. This was always the hardest part, though water searches were the worst by far because they took longer. There was something invariably terrifying about death rising from the deep.

She and Saul moved closer, staying well outside the circle of activity. The body was wrapped in tarp and tied with thick rope. Weights had been attached to the rope—more than enough to keep it submerged indefinitely. With the tarp, even as the body decomposed, it would remain in its final resting place.

Not final.

You're going home.

My job's done.

Exhaustion pulled at her, the aftereffects of her adrenaline high. “Come, Saul.”

He trotted at her heel, ears up and alert as they hiked slowly back to the road. Lei's truck sat at the makeshift trailhead—the same place Mark Jones's truck had been spotted after the disappearance of Shelly Jones. For all his apparent preparation, he hadn't realized he'd been seen, or expected the cops to call in someone who could track where he'd dumped his wife.

She still had almost a four-hour drive ahead of her. It was tempting to plan to stop off somewhere and take a nap, but Emma would worry.

It was easier to put her friend and roommate's worry at the forefront, but the truth was that Lei didn't sleep any place but in their little fortress of a house. She'd tried. Even twelve years later, when a job forced her to overnight in a hotel, fear kept bolting her awake hour after hour, and even Saul's presence wasn't enough to change that. She'd tried pills and therapy—she was the child of a psychologist, after all—and she'd even gone so far as to attempt to numb the memories with whiskey. None of it ever truly got her past her own frequent personal nightmare.

Once they reached her truck, she took a few minutes to set out Saul's food and water in a pair of bowls. He could eat on the go, but they weren't so pressed for time that she had to rush him.

Lei checked to make sure he was good and then dug out her cell phone. There was only one text from Emma. Call when you're done.

She dialed from memory. The phone barely rang before her friend picked up. "How'd it go?"

"We found her."

Emma hissed out a breath. "Good. That's good. I was tracking your location. Why is it always a lake?"

"Because *CSI* doesn't cover the fact that dogs like Saul can track a scent even over running water. And how many books did we read in school, and after, where a person crosses a river to confuse a trail?" It might confuse some dogs, but cadaver dogs' training meant it would take a whole hell of a lot more than that to lose a trail. It also meant that strange things like underground streams or inclement weather could lead to an unfollowable trail. *Life is never boring.*

"Good point. I guess I shouldn't complain. It makes our job that much easier."

"Yep." Saul had finished eating, so she wiped down his bowls, tossed the remaining water, and tucked them back into her pack. "How are things going?"

"Nothing catastrophic happened while you were gone. We got a few more requests for searches—the springtime surge is in full effect—and Isaac offered us a job. Again."

Isaac Bamford being the sheriff of their small town, Stillwater. Lei smiled despite the absurdity of it. "He does realize that cadaver dogs aren't very useful in a town where the last murder was fifty years ago, right?"

It was glaringly clear to anyone with eyes that Isaac cared less about having Lei and Emma on staff and more about spending time around Emma. He'd held a flame for her for years, ever since she and Lei bought the house. The only person in Stillwater who *didn't* know that was Emma herself.

“He’s persistent. I’ll give him that.”

“That he is.” Though if he’d just ask Emma out, they could be done with all the nonsense of him offering them a job. Again. They were independent contractors for a reason. It gave them the freedom to do the most good possible—and to turn down jobs that didn’t measure up. They had an excellent system. Lei and Saul traveled, while Emma worked remotely using her technical skills to do everything from finagle grids to researching to hacking—though that last skill was one they left off their résumé.

They were a good team. One of the best.

“When will you be home?” Emma’s question snapped her out of her musing.

“I’m leaving right now. Three and a half, maybe four hours.” She glanced at Saul and held her phone out. “Saul, say hello to Prince.” Saul barked, and almost instantly a tinny bark responded. Lei originally got the golden retriever to act as backup to Saul, but he’d bonded with Emma instantly. He had basic training for simple searches, but in practice he functioned more as a therapy dog. Lei was just grateful her friend had bonded with *something* not connected to the trauma they’d survived. *Someone beyond me*. Dogs were better than people most of the time anyway.

“Prince is missing Saul. Drive safe.”

“I will.”

“I’ll keep the light on.”

“You always do.”

That was the other reason she couldn’t stay out overnight. Lei had done it before—and would again—and both she and Emma survived just fine, but neither of them handled it well. After hours of sleeping like shit, she would come home and find Emma curled up with Prince on the couch by the front door. Waiting for to see for herself that Lei was alive and well.

A shrink would have a field day with their friendship. Lei's parents had thrown the best shrinks in the country at her—and at Emma by association—in the years since the Sorority Row Murders. It never failed to disappoint them when psychologist after psychologist failed to *fix* their damaged daughter. They were happy she'd survived, of course, but every strained phone call reinforced the fact that she'd never be their darling daughter again.

Even for all that, at least they tried.

They were a far cry better than Emma's parents, though that wasn't saying much.

She put her broken pieces back together in a way they didn't recognize—couldn't recognize, because then they'd have to face the depth of the terror she'd lived through. Easier for everyone if they kept their distance, aside from the expected monthly phone calls.

That monster . . . No. She was stronger than that. Refusing to name him gave him power and turned him into a bogeyman. Hadn't Lei learned that through watching Emma over the years?

Travis Berkley. The Sorority Row killer.

Even if Lei and Emma technically survived that night, Travis had killed the innocent girls they'd been the same way he'd cut down twenty-one of their sorority sisters.

And Lei was the one who'd unwittingly given him access to the house.

Saul nudged her leg, a clear sign to get her ass in gear and stop wallowing in guilt over something that happened more than a decade ago. For all her claims about being as well adjusted as someone who'd gone through that level of trauma could be, and her lack of fear in facing the world after she'd seen the worst it could offer, Lei's life had jumped the rails that night, and she'd never quite reclaimed her path.

She'd made her peace with that.

Mostly.

“Up, Saul.” She waited for him to jump into the truck and then shut the door firmly. It was time to go home.

Dante Young knew it would be bad the second he saw the officers’ grim expressions. To a man, they were trying to tough it out, but all looked green around the gills. Seattle might not have the highest crime rates in the country, but it saw its fair share of murders. For something to affect the cops this thoroughly, it was going to be a rough one.

Then again, he wouldn’t be here otherwise.

He held the police tape out of the way for Clarke Rowan, his partner. She shot him a sharp look, but it was halfhearted at best. In the years they’d worked together, they’d learned to pick their battles. Clarke put up with his “macho blue-blood bullshit,” and he didn’t take the chip on her shoulder personally.

She ducked under the tape. “Figures that we’re not getting two cake cases in a row.”

“Not sure the last one qualifies as a cake case.”

“It was as open-and-shut as they get. Husband cheats on wife with yoga instructor. Wife kills husband and yoga instructor and, since she happens to be an avid Stephen King fan, tries to put a ritual spin on the murders to point the cops in a different direction. It took us twelve hours to figure out.”

“Because you’re an avid reader of horror and those cops weren’t.”

Clarke’s fascination with all things macabre qualified as one of those things he’d never understand, no matter how long they were partners. Working for the FBI—and the Behavioral Analysis Unit, specifically—meant they saw the worst humanity had to offer. After the cases he’d worked, he needed the mental break that comedy or even action provided. Horror didn’t fit the bill.

But Clarke never bothered to fit into any expectations.

Dante nodded at the detective standing outside the front door. It was rare that the BAU was called in before the scene had gone cold, but he and Clarke had already been in the area for the aforementioned murders about an hour south of here. “Detective Smith?”

“You BAU?”

“Agents Young and Rowan.”

He eyed them, and Dante found himself holding his breath. Seattle was known for being forward thinking, but that didn’t mean it extended to Detective Smith. He and Clarke were quite the pair and he knew it. A big black man and a tiny little redhead with freckles who looked about sixteen didn’t exactly scream *Feds* to most local cops. It was why Britton Washburne, their boss, usually kept them to cases in bigger cities unless he felt an exception needed to be made.

Finally, Smith sighed and his shoulders dropped half an inch. “Might as well take a look.” He motioned to a scrawny brunet standing by. “Mitch, get them booties and gloves.”

Dante exchanged a look with Clarke. Booties weren’t a good sign. The bodies had already been carted off by the coroner, and the preliminary forensics scan was completed. There was less worry about contaminating the scene now, but if they needed to cover their shoes, that meant the scene was just as bad as he’d expected from the cops’ faces.

He pulled on the plastic shoe covers and followed Smith into the apartment. They were in the university district, which meant the victims were likely students. “Where did they attend?”

“University of Washington. All three were graduating that year.”

“Bummer,” Clarke muttered.

Smith shot her a sharp look but didn’t comment. The main floor of the apartment didn’t appear to have anything out of place but for a single lamp knocked over. Dante moved to the sliding glass

door overlooking the street. They were on the second floor, which was high enough to give the occupants comfort, but it wasn't much of a deterrent if someone was determined to gain access. He tried the door. "Unlocked."

"You think he came in there?"

Dante was already moving again, circling through the kitchen. A knife was missing from the block. *Because of course. Not enough to break in. Have to kill them with a weapon from their own apartment.* Something about that pulled at him, like he'd seen or heard of it before, but he set it aside.

This pass was for first impressions. Later he'd go through second impressions and see what else popped.

"That way." Smith pointed up the stairs.

"Not joining us, Detective?" The edge in Clarke's voice spoke volumes. She'd seen that initial hesitation and resented it. She always did—as much on his behalf as on her own.

"I've seen it. No need to see it again."

Dante braced himself. He already knew the bare minimum—three female victims, all stabbed to death—but there was stabbed and then there was *stabbed*. For the BAU to be the first call the locals made . . .

Walk up the damn stairs and see for yourself.

He followed Clarke to the second floor. For a second, Dante thought the carpet changed from the nondescript beige to a shocking crimson, then his mind caught up with his eyes, and he realized that it was soaked with blood. It started just before the first door, and even after several hours, spots gleamed wetly in the light.

"Fuck," Clarke breathed. "This is worse than the last one, and that chick was *trying*."

“Yeah.” He edged around her and walked carefully down the hall. There were several sets of footprints in the liquid, but there was no telling which belonged to the unidentified subject—the unsub—and which to a friendly.

The first door was cracked open, and he touched it with a gloved finger to push it the rest of the way open. Where the downstairs looked almost eerily idyllic, all of the violence had been saved for this floor of the apartment.

Judging from the shredded state of the mattress and the blood spatter on the wall, the unsub had caught a victim here in her room and then dragged her into the hallway. “Where were the bodies found?” He raised his voice just enough to carry down to Smith.

“Office up there. All three were laid out.” Smith sounded vaguely sick to his stomach and pissed off about it.

The other two rooms were variations of the same. Slashed beds. Blood everywhere. A trail leading into the hallway and then farther down to the fourth door. “Lots of work. How’d the others sleep through their roommate being stabbed to death?” Clarke grimaced at the blood on the floor. “This is a shit-ton of trauma. No one sleeps through that, even if you’re drunk as fuck celebrating your upcoming graduation.”

“Time of death and a tox screen will tell us a lot.” He followed her into the office. It was the biggest of the rooms, and it was more rec room than office. A desk with an iMac was set up in the corner, as well as a printer and some other tech. A second desk held a charging station with two computers, headphones in pink, blue, and red, respectively, and a tablet. The couch was old and threadbare, but clean. Or it had been.

There was enough blood on the floor that he could see the faint impressions where the bodies had sat until the cops were notified by a friend of one of the girls who’d come over for a study

session but found no one answered the door or their phones. The landlord had let her in and they'd found the carnage. The girl had had the foresight to call the police and stay out of the scene—a small miracle.

But Clarke was right. There was something off about the timing. Dante turned a slow circle, taking in the room again. “Phones.”

“What?”

He strode to the desk with the charging station. Tucked in the drawer were three phones, all crushed.

Clarke leaned around to get a look at them. “Why crush the phones if he sneak attacked them in their rooms? For that matter, how the hell did you know they were here?”

The memory that had bothered him downstairs solidified. *I know this case. I've seen this before, if only in case files.* “You're, what, twenty-five?”

“You know damn well that I'm twenty-nine, asshole.”

He gave her a brief smile despite the scene around them. “Right around the time you were graduating high school, there was a case like this. Bigger. Flashier. A higher body count. The Sorority Row Murders.”

“No shit? I vaguely remember that.” She frowned at the room. “That guy killed like thirty women. Even as far away as Chicago, that was big news. Weren't there survivors?”

“He killed twenty-one, and yeah, there were two survivors.” He'd been going through the academy at the time, and one of his instructors used the case as a teaching point. Those survivors—their names escaped him—were key witnesses in identifying Travis Berkley as the man who killed their sorority sisters, but local cops still had to build the case against him.

As the only son of billionaire Gerald Berkley—along with being a football star, holding a 4.0 GPA, and volunteering at a homeless shelter in his free time—Travis was borderline untouchable. The girls’ accusations brought only disbelief.

But as more and more evidence was collected, it became increasingly clear that he was just as much a monster as they’d accused him of being. It had been one of the most sensational cases in the last decade or so, and Dante had found the whole thing fascinating in a horrifying kind of way. To him, it just went to show that good police work could bring down even the smartest and most privileged of killers.

“Don’t tell me he got out on parole?”

Dante shook his head. “He’s still locked up, last I heard.” He eyed the phones. “He locked the girls in their main room and then took out them one by one. At first, he told them he was letting each girl go, but eventually the carnage was too much to hide and he stopped pretending he was doing anything other than murdering them.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

“Yeah.” The stuff of nightmares. “But if this guy is following that MO, then that explains why the women didn’t hear their friends being murdered—they didn’t sleep through it. They were locked in here.”

“Which invites the question—who’s using Travis Berkley’s playbook?”

And where would he strike next?