

The Girl in the Woods

By Kristen Ashley

TEASER CHAPTERS

Chapter One

The Last One

Standing in the doorway staring at a dead woman, Zachariah Lazarus knew this case was going to be his last.

He'd lost his wife to this.

He couldn't drop everything, fly five hours, drive for two and a half, stand in the doorway of a room and assume responsibility for another lost soul.

He'd see to her. If he caught a break, he'd find the twisted mess of a human being who was behind it, and he'd put him out of commission. If he didn't, he'd uncover everything he could and leave it for the next guy to use when he stood in a door and stared at a life ended in a grim and tragic way, hoping like hell he'd catch a break.

But Rus was done.

He was heavy with this shit. Struggling to breathe under a boulder he carried, which grew bigger and bigger, threatening to crush him.

He took a single step into the room, fighting against that weight he'd carried for years but only started feeling the day he signed his divorce papers.

The room was cold, incredibly cold. They'd jacked the AC way up to take care of her. It was probably another reason the owner was impatient to get her out of there.

She was lying in a cradle of plastic sheeting, like the other seven had been.

Her back was to the door, just like the others.

She was arranged in a position of sleeping, on her side, one leg hitched and resting on the bunched plastic tucked around her, arms cocked, hands tucked under her cheek.

She'd been anally raped, he could tell by the blood. Rus knew from experience she'd likely also been vaginally raped.

The back of her head had been bludgeoned, her long blonde hair matted and mingled with the color of rust, the stained ivory of jagged pieces of skull and the gore of exposed brain matter showing through the strands.

He'd spoken to his team on the drive there. They'd come and gone and were queuing up evidence to process what they'd found.

At that moment, the local sheriff and two of his deputies were outside, the sheriff not three feet behind him, the deputies trying to calm an irate motel owner who wanted the body removed.

He was going to have to put up with crime scene tape, but cruisers and an active investigation fucked with his ability to rent rooms.

This was too bad, since the man needed the money so he could put some fucking cameras in his reception and parking lot. Perhaps he hadn't already because their presence made his current clientele nervous, but this meant the zero evidence Rus knew his suspect left behind added to the zero video footage would leave Rus and this woman with less than zero to go on.

She'd been there since discovery by the motel's maid yesterday morning. She was still there due to the fact the MO was highly publicized, and the call needed to be made that would put Rus on a plane.

This boded well for the start of the investigation. It said the locals weren't going to mess around. They didn't try to take lead. They didn't start an investigation they weren't going to be able to finish.

They made the call. Rus arranged for agents in the Seattle division to head out and process the scene, gave the locals his ETA and asked that the scene was secured, nothing disturbed, so he could see her as she was left.

Precisely as she was left.

Great emotion put a stamp on a space.

Stand in the doorway after a child's birthday party, you could feel the joy even if you didn't see the mess left behind or smell the residue of frosting.

Stand in the doorway of a crime scene, you could feel the suffering.

He normally let it wash over him like this, taking on the added weight of that despair, smelling the residue of misery.

He stood in that doorway longer, though, and not because she was going to be his last one.

He couldn't put his finger on why, something was just...

Off.

When he couldn't figure it out, he shook it off and moved farther into the room, down the near side of the bed, noting the coating of blood on her buttocks and thighs left from the violations she sustained, the bruising around her ankles, the smears and pooling on the plastic by her head.

She'd been raped here, and murdered here, tied to that bed.

Before that happened, the plastic sheeting had been spread across the mattress, down its sides, along the floor and up the wall. Once the perpetrator was finished, he'd tidied up, positioned her, but otherwise left no trace.

They'd find her blood and sweat and tears and hair on that sheeting.

Nothing from him.

The profilers had ideas about why she was positioned this way, with the worst of it facing the door.

Rus usually put a good deal of stock into what profilers said.

The first three victims, he bought it.

The last four, now five, he knew this whole show was for him.

Rus set about examining the room even though he knew, if his guy finally fucked up, Rus wouldn't pick it up by looking around. It'd be discovered in forensics.

He still did it, just in case he saw something someone else might miss.

He was thorough.

As such, he stood gazing curiously at her clothes tossed in the corner that the team had left for him to see.

Not unusual. The victim's personal effects were meaningless to her perpetrator.

Her purse had been tossed there too.

Again, there was something not right about it.

They were usually in a tidy, discarded bundle. This all seemed flung in one direction to get it out of the way.

It wasn't a massive shift of MO, but Rus was attuned to everything.

He moved away from his perusal of the room because she'd been there too long. She needed to advance to her next violation, a full autopsy, before she was cleaned up and returned to hands and hearts who loved her.

This meant Rus didn't further delay what he had to do next, even if it was the worst part.

He moved to the other side of the bed, the side he'd so far avoided.

Yeah.

This was what always punched him right in the gut.

And this was what made her his last.

From this angle, take away the plastic sheeting, the contusions and scrapes on her knees, ankles, and wrists, she looked like she was sleeping.

No damage to her face, not even a shadow of a bruise. No blood splatter. The duct tape, on which they'd found negligible residue from the fourth victim, giving indication it was what he used to keep them quiet, had been removed with no visible trace.

Always, the face clean and tranquil and waiting for him.

Since the fourth victim, waiting for, specifically, Rus.

As usual, she was a beautiful girl. His guess, early twenties. A long life ahead of her she would not lead. Career. Love. Marriage. Children. Birthdays. Holidays. Vacations. Graduations. Grandchildren. Retirement. Books she'd never read. Meals she'd never eat. Laughter she'd never share.

That was done, it was tragic. It added to the weight he carried, he'd wake up from dreams about it, his mind would wander to thoughts of it when he let his guard down.

But in the end, he could do nothing about it.

It was time to get on with what he might be able to do something about.

Taking a deep breath, he retrieved the nitrile gloves he'd tucked into his pocket, pulled them on and carefully pressed his fingers between the prayer position of her hands.

A chill glided over his skin.

He could feel the edges of the "gift" that the killer always wrapped in his victim's palm, but the other wasn't there.

It was always there.

From the fourth one, *right there*.

He felt around.

Nothing.

Carefully, he lifted her top hand, which shifted the weight of her head since her cheek was resting on them, and he peered in.

The crystal resting in her palm glinted, a pink one this time, but other than that...nothing.

He grabbed his phone, turned on the light, and kept her hand and head raised, leaning deeper, looking closer.

Not there.

With great care, he removed his hand, then slid his fingers between her and the sheeting.

He lifted.

It wasn't there either.

His blood ran cold.

Now he knew what was off about this room, this girl, this murder.

Carefully, he rested her again to the plastic, turned off the light, shoved his phone in his back pocket, and snapping off the gloves, he strode out of the room right to Sheriff Harry Moran.

"I told you not to remove anything from the scene," Rus stated.

Moran's brows drew down. "We didn't."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He'd given explicit instructions, and his team wouldn't fuck that up.

"My boys?" he demanded.

"They didn't either."

"Nothing?" Rus pushed.

"Nothing," Moran asserted.

"You're sure of that?" Rus kept at him.

Moran was getting annoyed. "I've been here for twenty-two hours, Agent Lazarus. I was the first on the scene. Your guys came in, but I supervised. And when we sealed it, I personally sat in my cruiser all night and guarded it until your arrival. Nothing has been disturbed, and nothing has been removed."

Rus was reminded that a year ago, this sleepy town in the Pacific Northwest had some high-profile trouble that was exacerbated by an inept sheriff.

One of the reasons Moran had his current position—the old was ousted, Moran was the new.

This meant Moran wasn't dicking around.

"What's going on?" Moran demanded.

"She's good to be moved. Call your coroner. Bag the crystal. The personal effects. Then get her out of here. We'll talk at the station."

And with that, Rus moved to his rented SUV.

Chapter Two

Lore

Rus folded himself in a chair in front of the desk as he watched the sheriff round it.

He was seriously tweaked.

Even so, it penetrated that, from the minute he stepped foot in Fret County Sheriff's Office, he knew he wasn't dealing with some Boondocks Let's Play Cops and Robbers, half-ass operation.

He should have known from the early call.

In Rus's twenty years in law enforcement, seventeen of those with the FBI, he'd noted some, not all, small-town/low-population counties (and some big-city/high-population as well) had piss-all-over-their-patch chiefs and sheriffs who hired men who were the same.

Men who were more concerned about the size of their balls than serving and protecting.

It was a toxic mixture of the need for status and control, and aggression.

It was about getting spitting mad a man took a knee during the national anthem, but feeling fully justified in defacing the American flag by making it black and gray with a blue stripe and putting that shit on everything from their cars to their backs to their coffee mugs.

It was feeling that their badge and their uniform set them apart in some way from the citizens they served, but when it came down to doing actual policework, they didn't know their ass from a hole in the ground.

Rus was relieved the vibe here was not that.

The look of it, the feel of it, was organized, competent and professional.

Including Moran's office.

This was where Moran did the work of serving a community in order to keep them safe, and when bad things happened anyway, as they always did, finding those who perpetrated those acts and doing what they could to aid the path to justice.

What this was not, was Moran's home away from home, where he put his boots up on his desk and shot the shit with his deputies, a bottle of scotch in the drawer he felt it was okay to imbibe from, no matter the occasion or time of day.

He continued to study the guy.

His uniform went to a dry cleaner. He got his hair cut at a barber and not a salon, and he did that on a standing appointment, not only so it didn't get unkempt, but also so he didn't have to waste time making appointments. He kept fit, but it wasn't a religion or part of his identity, it happened in the natural course of his life. He was a good-looking man, and he didn't give two shits that he was.

Right, so maybe there was a bottle of scotch. But that, and the pictures of his wife and what appeared to be his dad and his brother on the credenza behind his desk, was as far as Moran went in putting who he was in his private life in this office.

And that scotch only came out in times of break-glass-when-needed.

This office, and the entire department, was where shit got done.

Moran barely had his ass to the seat of an ergonomic desk chair before he started it.

“You wanna tell me what's going on?”

“Do you have an ID on the victim?”

Moran gave him a good stare as he came to realize who he was dealing with.

During those three seconds, he made the same deduction Rus just did.

Rus was here to get shit done.

Moran sat back and lifted his chin.

“She's local. Brittanie Iverson. Twenty-five. Got deputies who went to school with her, knew her. Not well, but they knew her. Though, the family has kind of a reputation. She was born here. Works at Bon Amie.”

“Bon Amie?”

“Burlesque club in the woods.”

Rus had been intent on making it to the scene, but it didn't escape him that, to get there, he'd driven through terrain that was dense forest and rugged.

There were towns. There were homes. There were businesses.

But for the most part, this was backwoods.

This area was about logging, hunting, hiking, fishing and keeping to yourself.

So, “burlesque club in the woods” was not something he was expecting to hear.

Moran read Rus's reaction and explained, "We got history. Trapping. Fur trade. Prospecting. Mining. As they had a tendency to do, white men put their stamp on this place a long time ago. And where he went, other things followed. Like the need to get himself some in the wilderness."

"Right," Rus murmured.

"There's a lot of lore around here, what with the lake and all," Moran continued.

The lake and all?

Rus knew Misted Pines was where Ray Andrews decided he was going to test the skills of retired ace FBI profiler Cade Bohannan. He did this by killing girls. A mess that included Bohannan's far more famous girlfriend's contractor getting shot and the exposure of a sex scandal that involved some of the men of the town. And that exposure was perpetrated by those men's wives.

It was big. It was interesting. It was lurid, shocking and had a double celebrity component with Bohannan and his girlfriend—award-winning, bestselling author Delphine Larue—so he'd followed the case himself. As did all of his colleagues, everyone in law enforcement and most of the globe since it was plastered all over the news.

So again, lore that involved the lake was not what Rus expected to hear.

Rus didn't like hearing unexpected things.

He also didn't get the chance to ask, Moran kept telling him about Bon Amie.

"Think it was Cin's four- or five-times great grandmother who shot her pimp because she was tired of him roughing her and her friends up. The marshal was partial to her, decided it was self-defense. In the clear and to look after women in a place they had nowhere to go and nothing else they could do to put food in their mouths, she took over the bordello. It kept up in that bent until Cin's great-grandmother decided it was time for the Bonner family legacy to move in a new direction. She took them out of the sex trade and into show business. Bon Amie is in the middle of nowhere, about fifteen miles north of town, not easy to find, not easy to get to, but people make the trek because it's a helluva show."

And with that, Rus knew Moran had made that trek to watch the show. Though he wondered if the man did it before or after that gold band hit his left finger.

Rus's mind filled with the image of Brittanie Iverson in plastic.

"You sure they're out of the sex trade?" he asked.

Moran was all about eye contact when he answered, "Absolutely."

Right.

He was sure.

Next.

“Cin?” he queried.

“Lucinda Bonner,” Moran told him. “Owner of Bon Amie.”

“I’m gonna need to talk to her,” Rus told him.

“You want her to have that heads up now?”

First things first.

“Has notification been made to the family?”

Moran shook his head, but said, “Of a sort.”

“What does that mean?”

“Brittanie’s father is a piece of shit. No idea where the man is, but he’s not in Misted Pines or Fret County. And this is a good thing. He drank a lot. Cheated on his wife a lot. Got into a lot of fights with anyone who might piss him off, and that was a lot of people, including his wife. And Brittanie’s mom was all about those ‘a lots’ too. She’d get fed up and skip town a lot, leaving her kids with a dad who didn’t give a shit. Once they were divorced, she had a lot of boyfriends, and she had a lot of good times. So yes, she’s been notified. But since she was so hungover when I spoke to her, she was mostly still drunk, I’m not sure she processed her daughter was murdered.”

Rus understood he was telling Moran something he already knew when he said, “I’m gonna have to talk to her too.”

“My advice?”

Rus nodded.

“Go to Cin first. She’s not family, but I’ll lay money down she knows more about Brittanie than her mother or her brother put together. And I’m not a gambling man.”

So there was a brother as well.

And it was interesting Moran referred to this Bonner woman as “Cin.”

“But we’ve got that info for you,” Moran went on. “Polly’s already put it together.”

He didn’t know who Polly was yet, but good.

Next.

“Let’s talk about this town,” Rus said.

He could see Moran was getting impatient, but he didn’t give into it.

“You want more lore, or do you want to talk about Ray Andrews?” Moran asked, and Rus knew he was fishing.

“We can get to the lore later, when we figure this out and we’re sharing a beer. I want to talk about Ray Andrews.”

Moran leaned onto his forearms on the desk and shared, “Probably won’t surprise you, that shit hasn’t died down. I’m not sure it’s going to. Case like that lives forever. We get tourists. And then there’s the women.”

The women?

He knew about true-crime tourists. People so fascinated with famous cases, they had to go to the place it happened, immerse themselves in it.

Rus thought that was fucked up, but one thing he’d learned in his business, there was no end to the kind of people there were and the jacked-up shit they were into.

And Moran was right, what Ray Andrews did in that town would live forever.

So Rus was interested in “the women.”

“What do you mean, ‘the women?’”

“Misted Pines has become a mecca for women who are done with being screwed over by men and want to live around those who are like minded. They’ve shut down their lives and homes wherever they were, took what money they got, and created a space up here. Some call it a neighborhood. Some who don’t like it much call it a commune. Some who don’t like it at all call it a coven.”

Well...

Shit.

“Can’t say I blame them,” Rus noted carefully, watching Moran closely, wondering which camp Moran was in.

He shrugged, sat back and said, “If they don’t cause trouble, it’s not my business. They don’t cause trouble. But they’re an entity in this town, and some aren’t real happy about it.”

Rus could get that, and he couldn’t.

He was with Moran. If you don’t cause trouble, he didn’t give a shit what you did or why you did it.

But the people of Misted Pines weren't responsible for what Ray Andrews did. They also weren't responsible for what several wives did to punish their husbands for breaking their marriage vows.

Rus knew a thing or two about women whose hearts were broken when their man's mind wandered from their marriage and fixed on something else.

It was just that, in Rus's case, it wasn't another woman.

"Brittanie or her mother have anything to do with this, for lack of a better word to describe it, coven?"

Moran shook his head.

Since this had no bearing on Brittanie Iverson, he had interviews to do, he had an investigation to conduct, so it was time to get down to how they were going to work together in doing those things.

Before he could start, Moran asked a question that had been preying on Rus's mind since he got the call.

"Do you think this is about Bohannan?"

These words came out of his mouth just as a knock came at the door.

Rus twisted that way, but before Moran could call out, the head of a woman poked through.

Rus's guess from the efficient appearance of her helmet of hair and the low-key makeup, this was Polly.

Though, from where that head was located, it was clear the woman was petite.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said to Moran. "But I know you'd want to know, Cade is here."

Speak of the devil.

Rus sat straighter in his chair.

Cade being Cade Bohannan, a man who had his own lore, and deserved it. Rus knew this from more than the stories, he'd gone to a class Bohannan taught.

This could mean a number of things, perhaps good, because Bohannan won his reputation by being one of the best in the business, or bad, because sometimes a retired agent who felt the need to meddle could fuck shit up.

Rus knew he was going to find out which way that would swing when Moran said, "Send him in."

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