
Chapter 1

There it was again, that feeling. That eerie, spine-tingling feeling you get when you're being followed. She'd felt it when she'd left her apartment this morning, and again when she'd left the community center. Someone was following her, watching her; she knew it. But that was silly. She was walking down a crowded street, any number of people could be watching her. This feeling, though, it had a hint of malice to it, and it was starting to frighten her. If she'd learned anything in her life, it was to trust her feelings, and she wasn't going to question them now. Quinn tried to quicken her pace, but she was already walking as fast as she could without drawing undue attention. Only two more blocks to go and she'd be home.

Who was watching her?

Up ahead was the corner, around that and one block to go, she would be home. Quinn pulled her bag in closer and put her head down, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Who was that? Quinn hurried past the man in question, but something about him was strangely familiar. Nothing about the man was odd, jeans, sweatshirt, dark hair, sunglasses, but

it seemed as though he wanted her to see him. Like him standing there should mean something to her.

Quinn nearly jumped from her skin in panic as the man started to follow her. She could see her building, see Mrs. Lei's cat jump from her balcony, the red curtain from her bedroom fluttering in the breeze. She'd forgotten to close her window again. Then she felt a hand close on her arm, pulling her, stopping her. Why couldn't she scream, yell, anything? The fear in her throat was choking her. She was so close to home. Her skin tightened and it felt like ice went down her back. Where was her voice? And when he whispered her name, she knew who it was. She would never forget that voice as long as she lived.

"Long time, no see, Chicky." Long time because she'd disappeared, she hadn't wanted to be found. Besides, he'd spent the last five years in Los Angeles, why was he here now? And he had to use that ridiculous nickname, too. She could hear it now, "Why do you call yourself Chicky-Baby?" And she'd respond, "Haven't you seen Pee-Wee's Playhouse? Chicky-Baby, the throaty, blonde-haired beatnik, that's me."

"Snake." It was a name and a question all in one. "Leave me alone. What do you want? I have nothing."

"Aw, Chicky, don't be so hard on yourself, you have a lot to offer by just being you." Snake ran a finger down the side of her face and smiled when she flinched. He still had the ability to frighten her without even trying; he'd been doing it since she was sixteen. "Now, where is she?"

She? She who? Why was he here? And better yet, how had he found her? She'd moved, stayed off social media, led a quiet life, she didn't even have a driver's license, but he'd still found her. "Tell me!" Snake jerked her by the arm and wrapped a hand around her throat.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't be stupid." He looked over his shoulder. "We have

to move, people are starting to watch." Quinn glanced over at her apartment building and saw Mrs. Lei on her balcony. Mrs. Lei was 90 years old if she was a day, and blind to boot, no help there. Maybe if she could scream, someone would help her. Who was she kidding? She was the youngest person on the block, that's why she'd chosen this location. The police aren't too apt to visit a street where the average age was 68. And that's what she'd wanted. She'd had enough contact with the police when she was younger to last her two lifetimes. At that point, when Quinn was working up the nerve to start fighting, she felt something in her back. Fear washed over her. "Don't make me use this, and you know I will. Now move."

Snake dragged her across the street, opened the door of a black Oldsmobile, and pushed her inside. She fell against someone and was pushed back to the other side of the seat. When she brushed the hair out of her face, another gun was flashing in it. He was wearing a bandana that covered the bottom of his face, but she could tell from his eyes he was Asian. The other man who had been with Snake took the driver's seat, but she could only see the back of his head; he had blond hair. Instinctively, Quinn curled into a ball and tried to make herself as small as possible.

"Pull out of here nice and slow," Snake told the driver after he sat in the passenger seat, "we don't want to draw any more attention." Quinn kept one eye on Snake and the other on the guy sitting next to her, particularly on the gun he was pointing at her face. Quinn realized she should be paying attention to the direction they were headed, but that gun was too close. And how is one supposed to concentrate with deadly objects pointing at them? Should she beg for her life? "Please let me go, Snake. I don't know what you want."

Just then, Snake reached back and slapped her in the

mouth. "You shut up. I don't want to hear you talking again, unless it's to tell me what I want to know."

Quinn couldn't stop the tears from welling up and spilling over. And she knew at that point this was for real and started fearing for her life. She'd lived so peacefully the past five years. She'd gone back to school, received her degree, and gotten a job. But she'd known, sooner or later, her past was going to catch up with her. And because fate was a fickle thing, the part that caught her was the most dangerous.

Xang Yuen was a precise man. Precise in the way he dressed, the way he talked, the way he lived. He was a creature of habit. He was dedicated and loyal to the system. Xang was the perfect police detective. He was in prime physical shape, in body and in mind. He avoided outside emotional entanglements, so he was married to his work. He no longer allowed any man but himself to dictate his life. Today had started out the same as any other, except for a feeling that something was going to happen, something that would change his life forever. And Xang disapproved of any feelings he wasn't in control of. Control was one thing that had been pounded into his head for twelve years.

Xang had made no friends since his return to America a year ago. He treated his fellow officers and employees with dignity and respect but was standoffish. He purposely avoided getting too close to anyone. When Xang reached his desk that morning, he noticed nothing out of place, nothing unusual to warrant this feeling he had. He checked in with the captain and returned to his desk.

Xang had been living in China for the last twelve years. He had studied hard through college and pursued his career in Law Enforcement. He'd achieved the status of Detective

before his return to the US. After his grandfather's death a year ago, he'd made the choice to return to the city of his youth and the parents he'd left behind. His parents, whom he'd had little contact with in those twelve years, were not happy with the choices he'd made while living in China. But they hadn't been prepared for this new Xang. He was not the son they once knew.

"Detective Yuen." Xang jumped at the sound of the captain's voice, ashamed the man had caught him daydreaming, something Xang never did. He stood.

"Captain."

Captain John Peters was a fine officer and had been on the police force for thirty years. He'd seen a lot of good men come and go and had developed a keen insight into people. John liked Xang, genuinely liked him, and hated to see a man so sad, for that's how he viewed Xang. "I just got a phone call from a detective in Los Angeles. Seems there's a murderer on the loose and they suspect he may be coming this way. San Francisco is his hometown. His name is Robert Pierce. This guy has a rap sheet a mile long, been in the system since age eleven. The LA detectives say they had a witness lined up ready to go, to testify against him, and she suddenly disappeared."

"Why was this man allowed out of jail? What's wrong with these judges?" Xang asked.

"Hey, you're preaching to the choir there. Word is he had a pretty lucrative drug trade going on down there, could be that a lot of money changed hands so he could get out. Anyway, they figure the witness was running back here and he's followed her to silence her. They consider him armed and dangerous. Here's a recent photo." When the captain handed Xang the photo, he felt like the air had been knocked out of him.

"Snake." The name seeped over his tongue and leaked

out like something foul. This man, this low-life, heartless, hate-filled man, was the one person Xang would enjoy killing.

"That's right, he used to go by the nickname Snake. Did you know him?" John was taken aback by the look on Xang's face. It was the first sign of expression he'd ever seen the man show.

"Know him," Xang's eyes hardened, "he was infamous among the beach gangs. No one dared mess with him." Xang looked back at the captain. "But why are you showing me this file?"

Captain Peters cleared his throat. "Pierce was seen this morning in Chinatown, one of the cruisers spotted him, but he slipped away before they could stop him. We also received a call from an employee of the community center about a strange looking man hanging around outside. She saw him when she was on her lunch break."