

## Chapter One

Sometimes terrible things happen in the middle of the night. Sometimes the monster under the bed is real. Sometimes there truly is a boogeyman hiding in the closet.

Sometimes people die.

“Do you think they saw us?” Jenny Lange gasped as she fled across the overgrown vacant lot in Detroit’s rough 8-mile area. Moonlight silvered the bright banner of the fifteen-year-old’s long blond hair, turned her face into a pale beacon as she glanced back over her shoulder. Dressed in a ski jacket, jeans and boots, she was little more than a slim shadow in the darkness. The night was black and cold. A biting wind whistled through the canyon made by the surrounding apartment buildings, whipping sparkling whirlwinds of snow from the crusty layer on the ground.

“Don’t know.” Lori Penski snorted with laughter. Also fifteen, she ran a couple of steps behind her best friend Jenny, her flight slowed by an intermittent attack of the giggles. “Did you see what they were *doing*?”

“What? What were they doing?” Micayla Lange’s heart pounded so hard she could hear it thudding in her ears even over the rapid-fire crunch of their feet punching through the snow. Slip-sliding along behind, she almost begged for an answer, knowing even as the words left her mouth that she was probably going to be ignored just like always. Only eleven and undersized, she was having trouble keeping up. Hurrying so as not to be left behind when her big sister and her sister’s friend had sneaked out of the apartment where they’d been babysitting her and she’d supposedly been asleep, she’d grabbed her coat and stuck her bare feet in the sneakers she’d worn to basketball practice earlier. The sneakers were proving no match for ten inches of snow: icy wet, they kept threatening to slide off with every step she took. Her feet and ankles burned from churning as fast as they could through the frozen slush, and her pajamas were wet almost to the knees. Even with her coat zipped clear to her throat, she was so cold her skin stung.

And scared. She was so, so scared. She and Jenny were never, ever supposed to leave the apartment at night while their mother was at work. They weren’t even supposed to answer the door. This rundown section of Detroit was dangerous, riddled with crime even in broad daylight. They’d only lived there for four months, since their parents had split up, and already they’d gotten used to the sound of gunfire at night and learned to rush straight in from the school bus so that they would spend as little time as possible on the street.

“Here they come!” Jenny’s eyes went wide as she looked past the other girls, back toward the sixteen-story brick tenement that backed up to the vacant lot. With much

shushing and giggling, Jenny and Lori had peeped in the windows of the basement apartment where a bunch of boys the older girls knew had been - what? Micayla had no clue. She hadn't made it all the way to the building before Lori had slipped and banged a knee into a window with a loud *clank* and the girls, choking with laughter, had bolted for home.

"No way," Lori gasped, as she and Micayla glanced back, too. Sure enough, Micayla saw, three or four boys were tearing around the corner of the building, shouting and pointing as they spotted the girls. But they weren't the only ones in the vacant lot in the middle of this frigid night. Off to the right, in the shadow of another of the boxlike apartment buildings, a lone figure stood watching. A man, Micayla thought, too big and bulky to be a teenager. Unlike the boys, who were loudly and enthusiastically giving chase, he melted into the darkness even as Micayla caught sight of him. A stray beam of moonlight slid over him to catch on something he was carrying: a pole? An aluminum baseball bat? Whatever it was was black, but had a shiny metallic gleam that showed up as a quick, glittery flash as he stepped into the light spilling from an apartment window above him then just as quickly moved into the dark again. Micayla didn't know why, but something about the man made the hair stand up on the back of her neck.

*There's somebody else here*, she wanted to tell her sister. But she was too winded to say it out loud. Plus Jenny was too far ahead. And Jenny never paid attention to her, anyway.

"Jenny! Micayla!"

At the sound of the familiar voice, sharp now with angry surprise, Micayla's attention riveted on the source. Wendy Lange, blond and slender like Jenny, stood wrapped in her shabby blue coat on the sidewalk in front of their apartment building, which was directly across the street from the vacant lot. The car she'd just gotten out of pulled off down the street, engine rattling, taillights reflecting red off the knee-high piles of snow that lined the curb.

"Oh, no, it's Mom!" Sounding horrified, Jenny slowed down, glancing around at her friend and her little sister in dismay, while Lori made a face and muttered "*busted*" out of the side of her mouth.

"Mom! Mom!" Micayla shrieked, waving. Unlike Jenny, she was so glad to see their mother the gladness felt warm as a little ball of sunshine forming inside her. Mom meant safety, and she hadn't felt safe from the moment she'd left the apartment. Now, suddenly, with their mother's eyes on them, she did. Stepping off the curb, Wendy waved back specifically at her as she started across the street toward them. Despite the wave, Micayla could tell from the way she was walking she was mad.

At Jenny, though. Not at her. Her mother rarely got mad at her. Micayla's my good girl, was what she always said.

Because Micayla always was.

“We went out to get some milk,” Jenny hissed, backtracking to grab Micayla’s hand. “Hear? We were just going to walk down to the little all-night grocery on Hines because you wanted milk, but we got scared and decided to come back. Got that? Don’t you dare say anything about us spying on the guys.”

“She’s gonna know....”

Jenny squeezed her hand so hard Micayla yelped. “Not if you don’t tell her, she won’t.”

“Okay. You don’t have to *hurt* me.”

“You just better not tell.”

“I *won’t*.”

“You girls get over here right now!” It was their mother’s stern voice. Micayla felt sorry for Jenny. Jenny got in trouble a lot, and Micayla hated it every time, whether Jenny deserved it or not.

“The guys took off,” Lori muttered to Jenny, who glanced back.

Micayla glanced back too and saw that the boys were indeed nowhere in sight. Only she, Jenny and Lori were left to face her mother’s wrath. Micayla felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. Jenny would probably get her face slapped at the very least, and the prospect made Micayla feel sick. She hated it when Mom and Jenny fought. What their mother would say was, Jenny was the one who’d been left in charge, and Jenny was *older*. Sometimes Micayla felt bad because, according to their mother, nothing was ever her fault. Although if she lied like Jenny wanted her to and got caught, this time it might be her fault and this time she might get her face slapped, too.

That wasn’t so good, either.

“Come *on*.” Jenny yanked on her hand. Lori had dropped back, obviously glad she wasn’t the one whose Mom was furiously marching toward them. By this time, Wendy had almost reached their side of the street. Stumbling a little because of the relentlessness with which Jenny was pulling her, Micayla kept her eyes on their mother as Wendy stepped carefully up onto the packed-snow path between the drifts that led to the sidewalk. Head bent, Wendy was watching her feet. The moonlight brightened her short blonde hair, gleamed off the slick wet blackness of the street behind her, sent her long shadow stretching out toward the hurrying girls.

That moment, the sight of her mother bathed in moonlight, the feel of Jenny’s warm hand clamped on her own, the wet smell of the snow, the sounds of the retreating car and their crunching footsteps and the bite of the icy, blowing wind on her cheeks, was frozen forever in Micayla’s mind. The last tick of *before*. If only she could stop time right there....

Because the after began a heartbeat later, when shots exploded through the night.

*Crack! Crack!*

The sound still bounced off the buildings, still reverberated in Micayla's ears, when Wendy crumpled. Just like that, like her bones had suddenly turned to dust. She toppled face first into the snow, which instantly began to turn scarlet around her. Micayla screamed.

And woke up.

Cold as if she'd actually been outside on that frigid night again. Which of course she hadn't been.

She was inside. The air around her was warm. The cold she was experiencing came from the frosty window glass she was doing a full-body press against. The curtain had been pulled back, and beyond the window - actually one section of a wall of sliding glass doors - the pool area glistened under the fresh layer of pristine white snow that had been falling since she'd arrived at her Uncle Nicco's lakeside mansion shortly after five p.m. Except for the pale gleam of moonlight reflecting off the snow, the world beyond the window was black as ink. Earlier, at the stroke of midnight, an explosion of fireworks had lit up the night sky as cash-strapped motor city had thrown its cares aside and celebrated the New Year. She'd watched, alone, through a downstairs window, then gone to bed.

If it hadn't been for the glass, she would have been out there wandering barefoot in the snow right now, Mick thought, and felt her stomach knot.

At least, from the absence of sound echoing around her, she felt safe in assuming that this time the soul-shaking scream she'd let loose with had been all in her head.

*Please God.*

She didn't need to see a clock to know that the time was right around 2:30 a.m. Just like it had been then. Plus it wasn't long after Christmas, cold as a meat locker outside, spurring snow. And she'd been upset when she'd fallen asleep.

Of course she'd been sleepwalking again.

*I'm twenty-seven fricking years old. Am I never going to outgrow this?*

Peeling herself away from the window, Mick ignored the mild vertigo that she always experienced when she woke up abruptly under these conditions, and took a deep, hopefully steadying, breath. Her heart, which had been pounding like a SWAT team at an unsub's door, started to slow down. Looking around, she tried to get her bearings.

Having gone to sleep in one of the eight second floor bedrooms, she was now two stories below, in the part of the vast, elaborately finished walk-out basement that led to the pool and tennis court. With no memory at all of how she had gotten there.

Carefully she closed the curtain, blocking out the night.

Her hands shook, but she chose to ignore that. Just like she ignored the ringing in her ears, the dryness of her mouth, and the racing of her pulse.

With the curtain closed, she was left standing in the dark. A pinpoint-sized red glow up near the ceiling reminded her that security cameras were everywhere. At the thought that her unconscious perambulation might have been witnessed by one or more of the security guards manning the monitors from the gate house out front, she felt a slow flush of embarrassment creep over her body. The good news was, it chased away the last of the chill.

She slept in flannel pajama bottoms and a tank top. The bottoms were red and loose, the top white and snug. Her long, horsetail thick chestnut hair trailed over her shoulders in two braids. Not a look meant for public consumption, and not the image she wanted to project to the security guards. At five-six, she was lean as a whippet and superbly fit. Hard-bodied. Cool, competent, tough as nails. Right now, though, to anybody who happened to be watching, she probably looked the exact opposite.

Current appearances notwithstanding, girly and vulnerable she was not.

Mentally flipping the bird at the invisible watcher who might or might not be behind the camera, depending on the degree of slacking that was going on, she padded back down the carpeted hallway. There was an elevator, but she preferred to take the stairs. A little exercise was what she needed to take the edge off. She didn't sleepwalk much anymore, maybe two or three times a year, but she knew the drill: her thought processes would be cobwebby for hours if she didn't do something to shake them out. By the time she made it up the semi-circular marble staircase to the second floor, her head was on straight and she felt normal again. Which wasn't necessarily a good thing. The anger and sense of betrayal that had been with her for almost twenty-four hours now had come back, and had once again settled into her stomach like a rock.

"Bastard," she said out loud to her absent ex-boyfriend. She'd said it to his face before she'd left, along with a lot of other things. She didn't know why she'd been so surprised to learn he'd been cheating on her. She knew men. She knew cops.

What was surprising was how much it hurt to find out that Homicide Investigator Nate Horacki of the Detroit PD was no better than the rest of them.

This time yesterday, she would have said she was in love with him.

But now....no way. She wasn't that big of a....

*Clink.*

Mick never would have heard the slight sound if she hadn't been right where she was, striding along the open second floor gallery that ran across the top of the enormous, eye-popping entry hall, nearly at the doorway of the bedroom she was using, the one she always used, that she'd come to think of as her way-luxurious home away from home. But she *was* there, and she *did* hear it. Stopping dead, she listened. To nothing at all except the hum of the heating system. Except for the faint glow of moonlight streaming through the windows, the house was dark. Not wanting to advertise her movements to anyone outside who might be interested, she hadn't turned on a light on her way back to her bedroom. Now every sense she possessed focused on the shadow-filled spaces stretching out all around her. The house was huge, and tonight, except for her, it was empty. At least, it was supposed to be.

*Clink.*

There it was again. Mick went taut as a bowstring, every sense on the alert. The smell of pine from the Christmas garlands tied to the gallery's wrought iron railing wafted in the air. Shimmery gold ornaments in a glass bowl on the console table to her left glinted as a shaft of moonlight played over them. Trying to remember how the house had looked before darkness had swallowed it up, she concluded that the tall, menacing shapes in the corners were the human-sized Toy Soldiers and Nutcrackers her Aunt Hope, Uncle Nicco's wife, had used as Christmas decorations, and relaxed a little even as she listened hard.

Silence once again blanketed everything. But she knew she hadn't imagined the sound. And it hadn't been a random creak that she could put down to the settling of floor joists or something equally innocent, but sharper and metallic. Purposeful, was how she characterized it. Which meant she needed to check it out.

She embraced the thought with relish. Checking it out was something to do, something to think about, something she was good at. And it was a whole hell of a lot better than lying sleepless in her bed trying not to think, which she knew was the fate that awaited her for the rest of the night.

Uncle Nicco had hired her to house-sit while he, his wife, five grown children and their families spent New Year's and the week after at their place in Palm Beach. Because of the bust up with Nate, she had arrived a day early, just a couple of hours after the family left. The house should have been empty for this one night.  
New Year's Eve.

So if the house was empty except for herself, what was the source of that sound?

Moving swiftly, Mick slipped into her bedroom and retrieved her gun from the night stand. The familiar, solid weight of the Glock 22 felt good in her hand. Her handcuffs were on the night stand too. She grabbed them, tucked them into her pocket just in case, and thrust her feet into terry flip-flops, which had been part of the spa basket her longtime best friend Angela Marino Knox, Nicco's daughter, had left on her bed as a Christmas present and which she had been using for slippers after painting her toenails

with the hot pink Passion Fruit polish that had also been in the basket. Then she retraced her steps, quiet as a whisper, moving cautiously but quickly back along the gallery, listening.

*Clink.*

There it was again. Probably it was nothing. Still, her heart rate accelerated as she focused in on the location of the sound: first floor, toward the rear. Padding down the stairs, the marble hard and silent beneath her feet, she tried to pinpoint the location more exactly. Left, past the huge formal living and dining rooms and the music room and the library. Slinking purposefully along, moving from shadow to shadow, she gave a fleeting thought to hitting one of the panic buttons that had been placed in strategic locations for the purpose of instantly summoning the security guards. The odds were high that the sound was something entirely innocent, but back up was always a good thing. Then Mick considered the possibilities for who had pulled security guard duty on this icy New Year's Eve, and made a face.

She didn't need back up, anyway.

No longer hearing anything out of the ordinary, she proceeded with quick caution, clearing each dark room as she passed it. As Uncle Nicco was always bragging, the security system was state of the art, not the kind of thing a burglar could easily breach. Plus, given the presence of the guards, the cameras, the fact that the estate was ringed on three sides by a twelve-foot high fence (the fourth side was secured by the lake) and every outside door had at least two top-of-the-line double-bolts, the house was a virtual fortress. What were the chances that...?

*Boom.*

Okay, that wasn't nothing. It was a soft boom, a muffled, barely audible boom, but a boom nonetheless. As if something had exploded, maybe, only quietly. Mick's eyes widened as she rounded a corner and spied the faintest of yellow glows emanating from a door about twenty feet away. A click, a boom, a glow - good God, could the house be on fire?

The security system included state-of-the-art fire detection. If the house was on fire, by now the system should be wailing its little heart out.

Unless something had compromised the system.

Adrenaline pumping, Mick glided quickly and silently to the open door, then flattened herself against the wall beside it. The yellow glow was gone. The hall - the room - the house - were once again silent and dark. A quick, careful peek around the door frame revealed exactly nothing: there was just enough moonlight filtering through cracks in the floor-to-ceiling drapes to help her ascertain that the room was empty. But there was a smell: a kind of acrid, smoky scent that reminded her of a detonated cherry bomb. And barely audible sounds - a shuffle, a click, a thunk. Although she liked to think she

possessed a highly honed sixth sense, one wasn't required to deduce that she was not alone. Her heart lurched. Her stomach clenched. She wet her lips.

Then professionalism kicked in, and icy calm descended like a curtain.

She was still peeping around the doorframe formulating her next move when a man, tall and lean, dressed all in black and wearing a black ski mask with one of those miner's lights affixed to a band around his forehead, walked out of an open door on the opposite side of the room as brazenly as could be. She hadn't previously been more than vaguely aware of that door. If she had thought about it at all, which she couldn't recall ever having done, she had probably assumed it led to a closet. Only no burglar - and a burglar this certainly was - would bother to blow open a closet door, and it was clear from the sulfurous smell, from the boom she'd heard, and most of all from the fact that the door appeared to be hanging drunkenly from one hinge, that it had been blown open.

The room was Uncle Nicco's private office, which meant the door almost had to belong to a safe. A closet-sized, walk-in safe that held God only knew what in the way of valuables. A safe she'd never even known existed.

Which it was nevertheless her job to protect.

The man was maybe six-two, broad-shouldered and athletically built, with a young man's confident gait. Open military-style jacket over a tee, pants and boots. With - she squinted to be sure - surgical gloves that made his hands look white as a cadaver's against all that black. Still absolutely unaware that she was anywhere in the vicinity.

Having registered all this in the space of a split second, Mick did what she had to do: stepped into the doorway, planted her feet and jerked her weapon up.

"Freeze," she barked. "Police."