

CHAPTER 1

What was that?

I bolted up in bed, heart pounding like a drum. The dark in my room was complete but I knew, without a doubt, that something was wrong. Horribly wrong.

I concentrated hard but couldn't hear anything amiss. No noise. No movement. Nothing. Not convinced that this was just my imagination, I grabbed my three-cell Maglite from the nightstand and threw off the covers. Cautiously and with trepidation, I moved to the bedroom doorway. Again I concentrated hard, ignoring the thumping in my ear.

Nothing.

Clutching the flashlight even more defensively, I edged out of the doorway. The quiet was unnerving. I snapped my head in all directions, checking out the dimly lit room. Only the moonlight coming through the window illuminated the rest of the apartment. My eyes paused momentarily on the two windows. Closed.

Nobody.

With the living room secured, I panned my eyes around my second bedroom. Window closed. No one. Yet the hairs on the back of my neck were still up. My gut twisted. *Something is wrong here.*

Again I strained my ears so hard that I heard the thundering of my heart beat. *A noise! On the edge of hearing. The outside stairs.*

I dashed through the living room, registering that the room dropped in temperature. It hit me harder as I skidded to a stop in the kitchen. With my clammy hands grasping the heavy flashlight even tighter, I glanced at the window. Closed. My eyes snapped to the door. Closed. Bottom locked. Dead bolt, not.

In one fluid motion, I slid into my snow boots near the door and into my winter coat on the hook. Snatching open the door, I leaped onto the landing.

The cold hit me like a slap. It had to be near zero but there was no noise or movement on the stairs. Unfortunately, it hadn't snowed yet, so no foot prints.

Leaning over the top rail, I scanned the sidewalk below. No one. My eyes flashed to the door leading to Dad's bar below me. Closed.

Taking a deep breath to ease my still thundering heart rate, I studied the surrounding area. Dead quiet. Not unexpected, it was the middle of the night. With a frown, I examined the area one more time before moving back into the apartment.

As I leaned on the door, I turned the dead bolt, giving a reassuring thunk and then locked the bottom lock. *Did I imagine all of this? No.* I frowned. The room was definitely colder and I did hear that noise. *I did.* Slowly I walked through my apartment again, checking every corner, looking to see if even a book was out of place. But it wasn't.

I slipped back into bed but couldn't fall asleep right away. Every mundane noise jarred me awake.

CHAPTER 2

Turning to lock my door the next morning on my way to work, I paused. *Were those scratches at the keyhole there before?* I studied them. I couldn't remember them but then again, I had never really noticed them before. I frowned but locked the door up with a shake of my head, almost convinced that I had imagined the night before.

Almost.

Sitting in my Jeep, I stopped with my key in the ignition. Okay, now my imagination was running wild. My hair on my neck was up again. I looked around but saw no one unusual or suspicious.

I drove to work, watching for tails. Work today consisted of taking over for John Huddleston watching a subject suspected of passing information on one of the electronic research businesses in town to the competition. Security Investigations, who I work for, had been hired to see if we could find out who, when and where.

Boring.

Especially boring since it was cold, grey and just a depressing day. It was going to snow. I could feel it in my bones. I waved at John who pulled away. He was my one of my bosses. Rich, my brother, being my other boss.

After a few minutes, I felt again that I was being watched. I didn't see anyone as I squirmed in my seat. *What is wrong with me? There is no reason for this feeling.*

Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling all day, even as I followed our mark to work in the late morning and waited around to see if he went anywhere else in the afternoon.

I locked up my Jeep at the office, glancing around. With a frown, I headed into Security Investigations. The biting wind whipped at me as I hurried inside. It hadn't snowed yet, but from the looks of the sky, it wouldn't be long.

I opened the door, greeted by the bell and the warmth of the office. It was quiet here today. I heard scraping noises in one of the offices and knew that John was headed out. "It's just me."

"Come see me, Mel." It was not a friendly tone.

Just great! The boss was mad about something. I shrugged out of my winter coat and tossed it on the coat rack near the door. A glance at my watch as I headed down the short hallway showed it was three in the afternoon. I was dead tired and just wanted to go home.

"Yeah?" I asked the big, dark haired man seated behind his desk. John was ex-Special Forces still with the build and the attitude. He was quiet and soft-spoken.

John's head raised. His eyes guarded. The air was tense. Lately it had been this way between us, especially when there was no one else in the office. "Anything?"

I shook my head. "I followed him all day. Just his normal routine. I kept a log like you wanted. Rich has the evening slot, but I bet Mr. Langerhorn just sits tight at home tonight. It's gonna snow any minute."

John nodded. He held out some phone messages to me. Pam, our regular secretary, was gone for a week on a family emergency. That meant that one of us had to answer the phones during the day. I had suggested hiring a temp, but both John and Rich dismissed it, our business is based on confidentiality.

I'm Melissa 'Mel' Addison and I work for Security Investigations, the only private detective agency in Quincy, Illinois. John and Rich are co-owners. They brought me on a short time ago to apprentice as a detective. And, to help out with boring things like surveillance.

Quincy Illinois is a small town in middle America with small town problems. We sit on the western most side of Illinois on the Mississippi River across from Missouri, about fifteen miles upstream from Hannibal.

I grabbed the messages from John. "What's the schedule for tomorrow? Am I still taking over for you at seven a.m.?"

John leaned back in his chair. "I'll call first thing in the morning. Let's wait and see."

I nodded and headed across the hall to my office. My new desk was piled high with file folders. I was doing employment screening for two clients. Since I was 'low man' here at the agency, I got all of the grunt jobs. As I sat, I thumbed through the call sheets.

One was from my Dad. The second was only a name. She was my travel agent and I knew it was about my tickets to Florida for next week, that no one knew about. Another call sheet was from a former client's mother in Oregon. I sighed. I didn't want to call her back but I felt obligated. The next was from Tim Henkle.

I frowned. *Who is this?* The last was from Jason Landry in Maryland.

I picked up the phone and dialed Jason first. Since it was already five in Maryland, I might have missed him. As I waited, I glanced at the Tim Henkle number. *Did I know him?*

"Landry."

"Jason, I got your message."

"Oh hi, Mel. Yeah. I just wanted to let you know that we'll have to file the papers to sue the two companies. I wanted to make sure that you are still on board with it."

"Absolutely. What ever you think is right, Jason." I shook my head wishing everything about the accident was finished. I tried hard daily to move on with life. "So this means what, in terms of a settlement and restitution?" I heard him take a breath.

"Well, it depends on the courts. The earliest we could hope for is this summer, but I think the insurance company's lawyers are going to drag it out."

I frowned. Jason was a lawyer in my deceased husband's law firm. A year ago we had been in a car accident that took both my husband's life and that of our only child. I escaped with massive injuries to the chest and right leg. It took over six months before I even began to feel normal. The scars, emotional and physical, will be with me forever.

I saw movement at my door and noticed John looking in. He leaned on the door post and watched with a concerned look in his eyes. I held up my finger for him to wait. "What about our last offer?"

"It was no. It's up to you, but my advice is we might get even more with a jury trial. They were clearly in the wrong."

I sighed and rubbed my face. "Do whatever we need to do, Jason."

"Good. As you know, the system is sometimes slow."

"Yeah. This is so infuriating."

"I know. If you need anything from us in the next two weeks talk to my secretary, Mary. Wendy and I are going on a vacation in the Caribbean. When I get back, I'll try to light a fire under their butts."

"Okay."

"How are things going, Mel?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine. Enjoy the weather down there." I hung up the phone and looked up at John. "Yeah?"

John examined me. The hard expression gone. "You got another call from Tim Henkle." He held out the paper to me. "Lawsuit in Maryland?"

I nodded taking the note. "The shipping company and the insurance company are dragging their feet." I leaned back in my chair and stared at my hands.

"Are you okay?"

I gave him a slight smile. "Next week will be hard. It'll be a year on Wednesday." I absentmindedly rubbed my right side where my scar was then picked up the message from Tim Henkle. I looked at John. "Who is this?"

John frowned. "His voice sounded familiar."

I picked up the phone and dialed. "Tim Henkle, please." I looked up at John. "No, thanks." I rested the phone back on its cradle slowly.

"Who was it?"

"Bart Hessor." A figure from my past. And the local drug lord.

John's eyes hardened.