

# Stalked

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Extract

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# One

Maggie awoke with a start, dreaming about sex. She wondered if she had dreamed the gunshot, too.

She lay tangled in the black sheets, her skin moist with a sheen of sweat. As she blinked, her brain tried to stutter out of the dream world, but the nightmare held her in its grip. Her eyes were open, but she was blind. She felt impossibly strong hands on her body, holding her down. A stench of dead fish overwhelmed her nostrils and made her want to vomit, but her mouth was clamped shut. She thumped against his flesh with her fists, but it was as if she were a fly tapping against a glass window, trying to get out and getting nowhere. He laughed at her, a mean rumble of pleasure. She screamed.

Her eyes snapped open. She was awake. Except she wasn't.

Stride was sitting on her bed. She heard herself say, 'Hey, boss,' making it sound seductive, which it wasn't. He was smiling at her, his eyes maddeningly dark and ironic. She opened her arms wide, and he came into them,

and she was ready to taste his kiss when he crumbled into sand.

That was when she heard it. Muffled and distant. *Bang.*

Maggie sat up in bed. Her breaths pounded in and out of her chest. She looked at the clock on her nightstand and saw that it was three in the morning. She had been asleep for two hours, although it wasn't sleep so much as a drunken unconsciousness filled with strange dreams. That was all they had been – dreams.

Except she wondered about the gunshot. Something had woken her. Maybe it was Eric, moving around restlessly downstairs. Or maybe it was the violent wind outside, making the timbers groan. She sat in bed silently, her ears pricked. Snow had begun – she could see the white rain through the window – and tiny flakes of ice hissed like whispers on the glass. She listened for footsteps, but she heard nothing.

She remembered what Stride always told her. Never listen to worries that come to you in the middle of the night.

Maggie realized she was cold. The bedroom was drafty, and her skin was damp. Even in January, she slept only in panties, not liking the confines of clothes under the blankets, but it meant she often woke up freezing. She got out of bed and scrambled to the thermostat, bumping it up several degrees. Down in the bowels of the house, the furnace rumbled to life, breathing warm air into the room.

She went to her closet to grab a robe. There was a full-length mirror on the door, and Maggie stopped to look at herself in the moonlit shadows. She had spent years finding things wrong with her body. She was too

short, not even five feet tall, and too skinny, with bony limbs and breasts that were like twin bunny slopes. Like a doll in her mid-thirties. Her black hair was cut as it always was, in straight bangs across her forehead. She was pretty – everyone told her that. She didn't see it. Her nose was small and pert, but her cheeks were too rounded. Her almond-shaped Asian eyes were so dark as to be almost black, with a few yellow flecks in an irregular pattern. Her features were too symmetrical. She could make her face do amazing things, twisting it into sarcastic expressions, making her mouth into a tiny 'O' rimmed with cherry-red lips, like a fish gulping for air. But pretty? She didn't think so.

She held up a forearm. There were goosebumps on her honey-colored skin. She placed a hand on her bare, flat stomach and watched herself in the mirror as she rubbed her abdomen in slow circles. Her vision blurred as she began to cry. She opened the door so she didn't have to look at herself anymore and slipped a silk robe off a hanger. She shrugged it on and tied it in a tight knot.

Maggie turned away, sniffled, and wiped her eyes. She felt dwarfed by the huge master bedroom and its massive mahogany furniture. On the far wall was a burgundy dresser, taller than she was; she had to stand on tiptoes to see inside the top drawer. Four hand-carved wooden posts loomed on each corner of the great empty stretch of king-sized bed. It was too much bed for her by herself, which was how it had been for weeks. She hated even being near it.

She took a step, and her head spun. She still felt the effects of the wine she had drunk in the park. She steadied

herself with a hand on her nightstand. When she looked down, she saw her shield and felt all the complex emotions that came with ten years on the job. She hadn't expected to be working now, but there was a part of her that couldn't leave the Detective Bureau, that wanted and needed to be with Stride. Or maybe it was because, step by step, the rest of her life had become a horror in the past year, and being on the job was a way to forget.

She stared down at the nightstand again and felt unease worm its way into her stomach. Something was wrong. She mentally retraced her steps, what she had done, where she had gone, hoping she had simply made a drunken error. But she hadn't. She had come upstairs and dropped her shield, her wallet, her gun, her keys, on the nightstand by the clock.

Now her gun wasn't there.

It had been an ugly Wednesday night. Bitter cold, the way January always was. By ten o'clock, Eric hadn't come home. Maggie had ginned up the courage to talk to him, but when he didn't show up, she felt herself growing angry. He had been secretive and withdrawn in the week since the holidays. She couldn't blame him for that. They had been strangers for weeks, arguing constantly. It was her fault. She was the one who had closed herself off, who had shut him out, because she couldn't deal with everything that had happened to her.

She grew sick of waiting for him and left the house. She took a bottle of Chardonnay and a corkscrew. She bundled up in her Russian sable coat, a wedding gift that she didn't wear often, but it was warm and made her feel like royalty. The snow hadn't started yet, and the

streets were clear. She drove down into the city, which was still festive with holiday lights, and then north along the shoreline drive until she came to a turn-off by the lake. It was deserted. She parked and opened the wine. When she got out of the truck, the wind blasted her face, but she ignored it as she followed a snowy trail to the dark, moving mass of Lake Superior. The stars winked down at her, undimmed by the glow of lights from the city to the south. The branches on the evergreens drooped with snow. Her boots sank into the drifts. Her coat hung to her mid-thighs, and between the fur and her boots, the cold slashed at her legs.

There was no ice growing from the shore here; the water moved too fast. Only in the worst stretches of winter was the cold powerful enough to send a tentative sheet of ice a few hundred feet into the lake. Instead, there was nothing but angry midnight swells now, frigid whitecaps breaking on the rocks and undulating hills of water that looked like sea monsters wriggling toward the beach.

She tipped the wine bottle to her lips and drank. It was chilled and dry. She had skipped dinner, and the wine went straight to her head. She felt sorry for herself, but with each swig of wine, she cared less and less. She stayed there for an hour, until the wine was gone and her limbs were numb. She threw the empty bottle end over end into the fierce waves. She thought about lying down in the snow and not getting up.

Take off her clothes. Die of exposure.

But no. Even though she had nothing to go home to, she knew it was time to go. She climbed unsteadily back to the parking lot and sat, thawing, inside the truck. Her

mouth felt stiff. Her face was pale, and her hair was crusted with snow. She was like the Tin Man, rusted over, needing oil.

She drove home slowly, feeling the effects of the wine. Her street was dark and quiet at one in the morning. Everyone had turned off the lights in their big houses and crawled under their goose-down comforters. When she opened the garage, she saw that Eric was home too. He would be sleeping in his office. She thought about waking him up and doing what she had planned to do, but it could wait until morning.

She stripped off her fur coat in the hallway, not even turning on a light. There was an antique chest near the door, underneath a brass mirror. Something was sitting on the varnished wood. Eric had left it behind when he came in. It was a black ceramic coffee mug, and under it, a small folded note with her name scrawled in Eric's handwriting. The mug still had remnants of coffee grounds in it.

She unfolded the paper. Even in the dim light, she could make out the words: *I know who it is.*

Maggie stared at the note long and hard. It was the same old song, the same tired accusation. She was angry that he still didn't trust her. She crumpled the note into a tiny ball, shoved it into her pocket, and went upstairs to sleep.

Where was her gun?

She could think of only one explanation. Eric had taken it. He had come into their room and taken it off her nightstand. She had not dreamed the gunshot. Except it made no sense at all. Eric was not suicidal; he was a

life force, energetic, passionate, pushing his limits. And hers.

Maggie saw a cone of white light shoot through the bedroom. Instinctively, she crouched, then crawled to the picture window that overlooked the lake. She stood up, out of sight, and edged her face against the cold glass until she could see. The blackness in the room kept her hidden. She saw headlights on a car parked fifty yards away, and as she watched, the car accelerated, its wheels spinning in slushy snow as it did a U-turn and vanished. She couldn't see its make or color.

She waited, watching the street. Snow was falling outside, big wet flakes streaking the window. She stared straight down and saw footprints in the white dust, leaving a track down her driveway to the street. Already the wind and snow were making the indentations fade.

Maggie ran for the bedroom door. Turning the knob, she hesitated, then threw it open. The hall was filled with vast shadows. She took a chance and said quietly, 'Eric?' She said it again, louder.

*'Eric!'*

She heard only the oppressive silence of the house. She smelled the air and caught the stale odor of beef she had made for a dinner that went uneaten. Maggie kept close to the wall as she went downstairs. She glanced in the living room and dining room and found them empty. Her feet were bare, and the floors were cold. She tugged the robe tighter and crept up on the open door to Eric's office. She wished she had a weapon.

Near the doorway, she heard dripping. Slow and steady. Drops falling into a pool. Her stomach lurched. She reached around the doorway and clicked on the light,



squinting as the brightness dazzled her eyes. From inside, the noise kept on, drip drip drip. There was a new smell, too, one with which she was very familiar.

She went into the office. Eric was there on the sofa, limbs sprawled, blood forming creeks down his face and splattering into red puddles on the slick floor. A gunshot wound burrowed into his forehead. She didn't run to her husband. There was no point – he was already gone. He was one more body in the hundreds she had seen over the years. Her eyes studied the room by instinct, a detective hunting for answers. She found none, only a terrible mystery – her gun, which had been on her nightstand when she went to sleep, was now in the middle of the floor. Smoke mingled with the mineral stench of blood.

Maggie wished she could cry. More than anything, she wanted to crumple to her knees and weep and ask God how this could have happened. But when she looked inside herself, she had nothing left. She bit her lip, stared at the man she had once loved, and knew that as bad as her life had been in the past year, it was about to get worse.