



Nightstruck



JENNA BLACK



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

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CHAPTER ONE

Walking the dog when it's twenty degrees outside isn't my favorite thing in the world, but, as usual, my dad was working late, and if I didn't take Bob Barker (don't blame me; my dad named him) out for a walk, I'd have an even more unpleasant chore in front of me. Bob is a seventy-five-pound German shepherd, and I know from experience he can make one hell of a big mess.

I bundled up in my down coat, pulling on a wool hat even though it would make my hair into an electrified puffball. Bob waited impatiently, eyes focused on me with the unnerving intensity only a dog can manage, his tail wagging in anticipation. He'd be just as eager to go out if it were *minus* twenty.

"Don't say I never do anything for you," I muttered at him as I clipped on his leash and stepped outside into the arctic blast.

My dad and I live on a narrow side street in Center City, Philadelphia. As Center City neighborhoods go, it's pretty good, but I was always glad to have Bob at my side when I had to go out at night. He wasn't a police dog, but he'd had some of the same training, and no one remotely sane would mess with him. I walked him down to Walnut Street, shivering and

cursing the icy wind as Bob went through his usual routine of sniffing everything in the neighborhood to confirm that it smelled the same as it did six hours ago.

“Hurry up!” I ordered him, but he was having too much fun sniffing to pay much attention to me. My dad, with his deep, stern voice, could probably get Bob to stand on his head with nothing but a simple voice command, but me, not so much.

We made our torturous way around the block, Bob squirting a drop or two of pee on every immovable object we passed. The moment he finally took care of business, I made a beeline for home. We were on Chestnut Street, and the fastest way back to my front door was to cut down an alley that I would ordinarily avoid. Even so close to home and in a safe neighborhood, my city-girl instincts balked at walking down a narrow, deserted alley at night. But I was freezing, and I had Bob, so I made an exception just this once.

There was nothing in the alley except for the back side of a few businesses, all of which were closed for the night, their windows dark. There was a church at the far end, but its windows were dark too, and as Bob and I walked away from the busy street, I felt like I was somehow leaving civilization behind. It didn't help that one of the streetlamps had burned out, creating pockets of shadow around recessed doorways and hulking Dumpsters.

A strange shiver ran down my spine, and my footsteps slowed.

It's not strange to shiver when it's twenty degrees out, I told myself.

But something felt . . . off. I looked all around, searching for a logical explanation for why I was suddenly creeped out. I saw nothing, though there were a couple of shadowy areas that

were probably big enough to hide the maniacal serial killer my lizard brain seemed to think was lurking.

I was chilled to the bone and could no longer feel my nose. If I stopped being a wuss about the alley, I could be home in less than five minutes. I wanted a giant mug of hot cocoa and my electric blanket.

But then I noticed that the hair on the back of Bob's neck had risen, and his ears had gone flat. I wasn't the only one who sensed danger in the darkness. Bob was staring intently at the pool of shadow at the base of the stone steps leading up to the church, and his lips peeled away from his teeth. The shadow wasn't big enough to hide a knife-wielding psycho, and I wondered if maybe Bob had spotted a cat. Or maybe even a rat.

Whatever it was, I wanted no part of it. One of the self-defense lessons my dad the police commissioner had taught me was to always listen to my instincts, and they were telling me in no uncertain terms that it was time to get out of that alley. I felt a little silly being spooked when there was no visible threat, like a little girl who was afraid of the dark, but there are worse things in life than feeling silly.

That was when I heard the wailing cry that turned my blood to ice and set my heart racing. Bob let out a furious bark and lunged toward the shadow, practically yanking my arm out of its socket. He was seventy-five pounds of pure muscle, and in a tug of war, I was bound to come out the loser.

"Bob, heel!" I yelled at him in my most commanding tone.

I must have sounded like I meant it, because Bob stopped straining against the leash, although he was still snarling, and his every muscle was quivering with his desire to attack. I didn't know what had made that bloodcurdling noise, but it wasn't a rat or a cat.

“Come on,” I urged Bob, giving his leash a little tug. At that point, I’d have happily walked a mile out of my way, if that’s what I needed to do to avoid that pool of shadow.

The cry came again, sounding as unearthly, as alien as before. I felt like I should cross myself, or maybe make a sign to ward off the evil eye. The sound was utterly and completely *wrong*. I took a step backward, tugging on Bob’s leash. Every instinct was screaming at me to run, but I couldn’t make myself turn my back on that shadow.

I don’t know if it was a trick of acoustics or if my imagination had been running wild with me, but the sound seemed to change. The unearthly wail became something much more ordinary, and I realized what it was: a baby crying.

The hair on the back of my neck and arms prickled, and I froze. I wanted the safety of my house, the security of a closed and locked door. Finally identifying the sound as a crying baby rather than a bloodthirsty monster didn’t chase away the sense of wrongness that gripped me. It didn’t seem to be calming Bob down any, either. My instincts were still telling me to get the hell out of there, and I kept hearing my dad’s voice in my head, telling me to listen to my instincts.

But what kind of person hears the cries of an abandoned infant—on a subfreezing night, no less—and runs away? It was a *baby*, for God’s sake! There was nothing to be scared of, and leaving a helpless baby to freeze to death in an alley just wasn’t an option.

The problem was Bob. He’d obeyed my command to heel, but he was still bristling and snarling. There was no way I could get close to that baby with him on the end of the leash. He was well trained and usually pretty obedient, but I’d never

had to control him when he went into attack-dog mode, and I was afraid he was too strong for me.

I looked around, hoping to spot someone else running to the rescue, but there was no one in sight. It was all up to me.

I tied Bob's leash to a lamppost, making three knots in the leather and praying it would hold. He barely seemed aware of my presence, his entire attention focused on the baby and his overwhelming desire to attack it.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked him, wishing he could actually answer. I'd been creeped out the moment I stepped into the alley. I could tell myself I'd watched too many horror movies and it was all in my mind, but that didn't explain how Bob was acting.

"Bob, stay," I ordered him firmly, but the moment I stepped away, he was straining against his leash, unconcerned with the fact that he was strangling himself in the process. I shook my head at him and hoped the knots in the leash would hold.

The baby's cries were growing weaker, to the point where Bob's snarls almost drowned them out. I began walking toward the church, trying to act sure and confident, as if I could somehow convince myself to shake off the weirdness. I still couldn't pick out the baby's shape in the pool of darkness, but there was a sense of movement, as if maybe the baby was kicking its arms and legs in its desperate attempt to get help.

How could anyone leave a baby out in the cold? I knew churches were popular spots for abandoning unwanted babies, but anyone with half a brain would know that this particular church was closed for the night. Which made me think whoever had left the baby had intended for it to die. Thanks to my dad's job, I was more aware than most of how much evil there

is in the world, and how cruel human beings can be. And how important it is for ordinary people—like me—to show compassion and responsibility.

Even knowing all that, I found my feet reluctant to move me forward. Maybe, if I just called 9-1-1, they'd get here in time to save the poor kid without me having to get any closer.

And if an innocent baby died because I was too chicken-shit to help it, how would I ever live with myself? How could I ever look my dad—who'd risked his life countless times as a police officer—in the face? I was already something of a family disappointment, and I couldn't bear to make it worse.

Calling 9-1-1 seemed like a good idea anyway, so I got out my phone and made the call as I continued to force myself forward. Behind me, Bob was still barking and snarling, but the baby's cries had faded to weak-sounding whimpers.

"Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?"

I had reached the edge of the pool of shadow, and I could finally make out the baby's shape, though it was still hard to see. It seemed to be wrapped in a black blanket, as if whoever had left it there had put extra effort into making sure no one would find it and rescue it.

"My name is Becket Walker," I said, hoping the dispatcher would be extra attentive to a call coming from the commissioner's daughter. "I've found an abandoned baby."

I squatted in the darkness beside the bundled baby, who was no longer even whimpering. The blanket was tucked so firmly around it that all I could see was a baby-shaped lump. A fold of the blanket was draped over its face. I stammered out the address to the dispatcher, then decided the only sensible, humane thing to do was to pick up the baby and share what body heat I could. The dispatcher was asking

me questions and trying to give me instructions, but I wasn't listening.

"Hold on a moment," I said. I put the phone down on the church steps, then gently picked up the black-wrapped bundle with both hands.

I almost dropped it, because it didn't feel like I expected it to. The body within the blanket felt strangely loose and pliable. My stomach turned over, the sense of wrongness once again coming back full force.

The 9-1-1 dispatcher was still talking to me, but I had no attention to spare. Something within me rebelled at the feeling of that body in my arms, but I fought my revulsion. Maybe the baby had some kind of birth defect and that was why it had been abandoned. That didn't make it any less worth saving.

I cradled the baby against my body with one arm, then reached for the fold of blanket that covered its face. Maybe when I looked into the baby's innocent eyes, I'd finally stop feeling so . . . weird.

There was a pin sticking out of the section of blanket over the baby's face. Thanks to the pressing darkness, I didn't see it until I pricked my finger on it. I cursed as a drop of blood welled on the tip of my finger. I still couldn't see the baby's face, though I had a vague notion of eyes watching me from the blanket's interior. I reached for the edge of the blanket again, this time being careful to avoid the pin, and brushed it away from the baby's face.

There *was* a face in there somewhere—I could see a pair of green eyes staring out at me—but I couldn't make out a single feature. It was if the baby had somehow absorbed all the light, leaving nothing but a black hole where its face should have been.

My chest tightened, making it hard to breathe, and the air around me suddenly seemed even colder. Once again, I was

struck by the sense that something was very, very wrong, though my conscious mind couldn't seem to figure out what.

Maybe it was the expression in those eyes. I'd never seen a baby stare at anyone with such intensity, especially not a baby who'd recently been bawling.

I froze, my hand still hovering near the baby's face, unable to look away, unable to move, as I tried to focus my gaze enough to pick out a nose or lips or chin. The drop of blood on the tip of my finger dripped down onto the baby's face—or at least onto where the baby's face should be.

Something flared in those green eyes, and the baby smiled at me. I let out a little scream and dropped it, scrambling back away from it on my butt. I didn't know what it was, but it was *not* human. That smile had revealed double rows of razor-sharp teeth.

My heart was pounding, and my body was suddenly drenched in sweat. I could hear Bob barking and snarling in the distance, and the dispatcher's voice was an indecipherable hum from my phone on the steps.

The baby—or whatever it was—moved out of the shadow, the black-wrapped bundle undulating like an inchworm. It rose up and looked at me, showing me those malevolent green eyes and the neat little rows of fangs around its smile.

And then the whole thing, baby, blanket, and all, broke apart like it was made of ash, crumbling and then being caught on a sudden burst of wind. The wind carried a cloud of what looked like dust toward me. I ducked and held my breath, but not fast enough to totally avoid the cloud. The wind swirled, then gusted again, blowing the cloud away and dispersing it into the night.

. . . .

I was still shaking when I finally got home, and though I was freezing, my case of the shakes had nothing to do with the cold. I wrapped myself up in a blanket and curled up on the couch, trying to process what had just happened. Bob seemed as freaked out as I felt, jumping onto the couch beside me and putting his head in my lap. He wasn't allowed on the couch, but house rules were the least of my concerns. Besides, he was a warm body, and he made me feel safe. Well, safer, at least.

What the hell had happened out there?

I shuddered and clutched the blanket more tightly around me. I heard again that first sound, the inhuman wail that had triggered some primal instinct to run. And then the cry of an innocent baby, terrified and alone in the cold.

Had either one of them been real? Had I somehow imagined the whole thing? Because what I thought I saw was impossible.

If I'd been even a little less freaked out, I wouldn't have been surprised when the police showed up on my doorstep. I'd made that 9-1-1 call, and I'd identified myself quite clearly. There was no way telling the dispatcher to "forget it" was going to work.

The patrolmen who stopped by to talk to me were perfectly nice, going out of their way to be polite, no doubt because they knew who I was. I was glad I couldn't read minds, because I don't think I would have liked what I saw in theirs.

Naturally, I couldn't tell them the truth about what had happened. They'd either lock me in a nuthouse or assume I was on drugs. So I told them that what I'd thought was a baby had turned out to be an alley cat. Cats can sound kind of like babies sometimes, right? And it was dark out. I'd called the police before investigating because I thought the baby might need immediate care, and then I hung up on the dispatcher in abject

embarrassment when the “baby” had jumped out of a pile of rags and turned out to be a cat.

It made me sound like an airhead, but that was better than psycho or druggie. I don’t know if the cops bought it, but they didn’t call me a liar. Not to my face, at least.

If only I could make myself believe my own story. But my mind insisted on reliving those last few moments, when the baby had inched out of the shadow and bared those awful teeth at me. And when it had vaporized—for want of a better word—right in front of my eyes.

Which reminded me suddenly that the cloud of . . . whatever had passed right over my head. I ran a shaking hand through my hair and practically threw up when I saw the oily black streak that was left on my palm. It wasn’t much. Not so much a streak as a smudge. And there were probably a million things it could be, other than baby residue. I’d been wearing a hat, after all. But I bolted for the bathroom anyway.

I washed my hair about eighteen times, my skin crawling. The mark came off my hand easily enough, and if there was any more of it in my hair, I didn’t see it amid the suds I rinsed off. Yet I felt sure I was tainted somehow. I didn’t know what that “baby” had been, couldn’t even think of some convenient folkloric label to pin on it, but I was convinced, body and soul, that it had been evil. And I wished I’d listened to my instincts instead of being a Good Samaritan.

My night went from bad to worse a couple hours later, when my dad got home. He’d heard about the 9-1-1 call, of course, and he didn’t buy my story of mistaken identity.

“I can’t believe you would do something so selfish and childish!” he said. He didn’t yell, but with that deep, commanding

voice of his, he didn't have to. He glared down at me with steely eyes, so furious his cheeks flushed.

"It was an honest mistake," I replied, making my eyes go big and wounded. When he and Mom were still together, doe eyes had often worked on him, but ever since the divorce this past summer, he was in a perpetual state of pissed off, and he seemed to like it there.

"Not another word!" he snapped. "You didn't call the police because you saw a damn cat. What was this supposed to be? A protest about me working so late?" His scowl deepened. "Did that friend of yours put you up to this?"

This was just what I needed after my already traumatic, terrifying, and embarrassing night. How could my dad think I would make a crank call to the police? And why would he suddenly drag Piper into this just because he didn't like her?

"No one put me up to anything," I said, my own pulse quickening with anger. Sure, I'd gotten in trouble a few times lately, and most of the time it had been with Piper by my side, but I'd given Dad no reason to think I'd call 9-1-1 just for shits and giggles. It stung pretty hard to think he gave me that little credit. "This wasn't a prank, and it wasn't some stupid cry for attention. It was an honest mistake, like I said."

"Don't make it worse by lying."

I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to look defiant instead of hurt. "So what you're telling me is that you've already decided what happened and why, and you don't give a shit about my side of the story."

For a fraction of a second I thought I'd scored a point, that Dad finally realized how unfair he was being. His eyes briefly softened, and there was a hint of doubt in them. But he hadn't gotten where he was today by allowing himself to feel uncertain

of anything. And getting him to change his mind was like trying to turn the *Titanic*.

“You are grounded for two weeks,” he told me. “You will not leave this house except to go to school and run errands. No Internet, and no phone.”

He held out his hand in a silent demand that I hand over my phone. When my dad says I’m grounded, he doesn’t fool around. I guess he was used to dealing with scumbags who made taking advantage of loopholes into an art form. I’d be lucky if he didn’t periodically toss my room just to make sure I hadn’t borrowed a phone from anyone.

“This isn’t fair,” I told him with a hitch in my voice. “I’ve done nothing wrong.” That, at least, was perfectly true.

He just stood there with his hand extended, his face cold and devoid of anything resembling fatherly compassion.

He didn’t used to be this way. He’d never exactly been warm and fuzzy, but he’d been fair, and he had a soft side that only my mother, my older sister, and I saw. There had never been any doubt in my mind that he loved me. But he’d been a different man since the divorce went through, harder and angrier and unyielding. I wanted my pre-divorce father back, but I didn’t think that was going to happen, at least not until after I graduated high school and left home.

When they’d split up, my parents had let me choose who I wanted to live with, and I’d chosen Dad because Mom was moving to Boston and I didn’t want to start a new school for my senior year. Right now, that wasn’t looking like the world’s greatest decision.

“I should have gone with Mom,” I told him as I slapped my phone into his hand.