

## chapter one

Gregory Klein watched the children fight over their rubber ball in the street. A Ford Explorer swerved to avoid them, and the driver leaned out the window to give them a piece of his mind. He was a short, pudgy man with a dirty rag wrapped around his head. Gregory thought he looked sad. Maybe he was coming from a funeral. Or maybe he had just spent the day alone.

Gregory could identify with that.

And so it was that he found himself picking up the phone. He had no idea who he was going to call. Most of his friends were out of town for the holiday weekend, and his family was so far away that the only thing on their minds would be how much he was spending to beam his voice to their ears.

He looked at the handset. It was dirty, smudged from a dozen different fingers at a party that shouldn't have happened. He tried to wipe one of the keys off and heard a noise from the speaker; he had pressed a nine. The five was also looking particularly grubby, so he pressed it a few times as well, and a couple of other keys, just for good measure.

Before he knew it, the phone was ringing, and then somebody was picking up on the other end. He waited for the obligatory *Hello*, the annoyed silence, and then the *click* that would come when whoever it was realized he'd forgotten to check the caller ID.

There was no *Hello*.

"Where am I?" the voice asked. It sounded old but not senile.

Gregory blinked at the receiver. He tried to stammer something, but nothing came out of his mouth, and so he kept listening. There was some kind of music in the background, only it didn't sound quite like anything he had ever heard before. It was familiar, reminiscent of something in the way modern techno remixes conjured up in Gregory's mind wistful memories of the songs they were butchering.

"It's cold here," the voice said. "But I'm glad you called. You're scaring me, but at least there's a you." There was a bark, an almost animal scream from somewhere nearby, and then a sigh. "I have to go," the voice said. "It was nice talking to you."

Then came the *click*. After ten seconds, the receiver started beeping, and Gregory jumped and replaced it in its cradle. He stared at it for a time and then forgot about the call and went back to his computer.

He had no idea that his life had just changed forever.

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Jackie Savage liked it when the teacher told them all to read, because then it got quiet and she could sit and listen to the wind. It toyed gently with the cornstalks that stood in thicketed forests around the edges of the playground. All too often, the soft sigh of rustling husks fell away beneath the shouts and laughter of the younger kids on the swings and the merry-go-rounds, but today, the charcoal-colored sky had opened up at lunchtime, and the slide stood empty and slick with buckets of rain.

Cradling her chin in her hands, she propped her elbows on Charles Dickens and stared out at the warm, fat droplets splattering in the mud. *It was a day like this*, she thought, and then she sensed Ms. Breyer coming toward her and she turned and pretended to read.

“If you spent more time in your books and less in your thoughts, you might be better prepared for our class discussions, Miss Savage,” Ms. Breyer told her.

Jackie looked up from her book and nodded. Her mind was everywhere but here.

That afternoon, five minutes after the bell had dismissed the final class of the day, Jackie got into her brother’s car and waited for him to reappear. He did this sometimes. He would never tell anyone where he had been, but he was known to stay away for fifteen, twenty, sometimes forty minutes. Then he would just climb out from behind some bush and smile awkwardly and nobody would dare say anything about it.

But today was different. Jackie waited an hour. The rain got a little lighter and then stopped altogether. She got out of the car and walked around the parking lot a few times. Ms. Breyer came out and dumped a stack of old books in the trunk of her bronze Tercel. She paused on her way back to the sidewalk for her purse and frowned at Jackie.

“Everything okay, Jackie?” she asked.

Jackie shrugged. “Just waiting for a ride.” She saw the worry flash across the teacher’s wrinkled face, but it was gone almost as quickly as it had come. She didn’t want to scare her student, Jackie thought.

“Well,” Ms. Breyer said awkwardly, “you could probably use the time to catch up on your reading. Unless you’re going to tell me that you finished the book already.”

Jackie smiled and nodded, and after a few moments of hesitant silence, Ms. Breyer got in her car and drove away. Jackie watched it retreat down the road, kicking up sprays of shed rain behind its tires. She watched until the glow of the taillights had disappeared from the puddles, and then she began to feel cold and very alone.

There were no other cars in the parking lot. Jackie went back to her brother’s ’72 Nova and walked all around it, wondering if he was playing some kind of joke. He had done

that to her once, too—waited beneath the car for twenty minutes until she got bored and got out. Then he had snatched her ankles and made noises like a monster. She had squealed, but then, she had only been eight years old.

Walker was not under the car, but the gravel beneath the Nova was dry. It had been here since before the rain started, since just after lunchtime.

*Don't panic*, Jackie told herself. There was going to be a reasonable explanation for this. Or maybe there wasn't, but there was going to be an explanation. That was all she needed. Once the mystery was gone, she would be all right.

But the mystery did not go away. By nightfall, Jackie was scared. She did not know why she had waited at the school the whole time. It was creepy after dark. There were only a few lights on here and there—one in the hallway, illuminating row upon row of deserted lockers; and one fluorescent bulb suspended over the office entrance. It flickered now and then as the wind shook the metal pole from which it hung.

She was sitting on the hood. She had gotten inside a couple of times when the rain had started up again, but the windows always fogged up, and anyway, she felt like she couldn't hear anything from in there. If Walker called for her, she wanted to know.

Walker never called.

Her digital sports watch read ten-fifteen. That meant it was close to nine. She had never learned how to set it, because to tell the truth, she had never liked it very much. But Mrs. Eubank had given it to her for her birthday, and the summer after that, Mrs. Eubank had died violently in a fire, and Jackie had felt guilty about throwing the watch away.

She was going to be late for Dad's nightly call. He would be worried. But if she were there, if she answered, what would she tell him when he asked to speak with Walker?

She circled around the school once more, but it was even worse behind, in the playground. There were no lights

back there, and only the sound of water rolling down cornstalks. The nearest house was a half-mile away. She could see the lights across the field, but that didn't mean anything. That was Winton Keener's place, and he was gone more often than he was there. He always left the place lit up to scare off the burglars, so it was impossible to tell if anyone would be there or not.

Still, she had to try.

Of course, if Walker came back, he would be mad that she had left the Nova unlocked. She went back and sat on the hood for another fifteen minutes, but it was clear now that he was not coming. Something was terribly wrong.

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Terry Young put in a new coffee filter and started the water boiling. Then he sat on the kitchen counter and put his face in his hands and cried.

One of the guests walked in and gave a little start. Terry rubbed his eyes and tried to pretend as though he had only been tired, but he could see in his reflection on the windowpane that his eyes were far too red for that.

It was Mrs. Newell. She was halfway to the handbag she had left on the table when she walked in that afternoon and threw her arms around Vicki. Her lipstick had probably gone stale, or perhaps it was time for her medication again. Her eyes were riveted on Terry's face. When he cleared his throat, she awkwardly moved one hand to brush the silver strand of hair from her forehead.

She was flustered. She opened the bag, rooted through it, and muttered something about cough drops. Terry said nothing to her. He poured more water in the coffee and then sat and tried to look past himself to the darkened back yard beyond the window over the sink.

Mrs. Newell extracted a hand mirror from her purse and made it almost all the way to the door before she stopped and turned around.

“Terry,” she said very delicately, “is something the matter?”

He shook his head. “Nerves, Mrs. Newell.” He didn’t know her very well. He wasn’t going to have this conversation with her now—not the night before, not with a near-stranger.

“Are you certain, my dear?” she asked.

He nodded, and after another few moments, she left. He hopped off the counter, poured himself a cup of coffee and went up the back stairs to the guest bedroom. He could still hear the murmur of voices downstairs, the faint rise and fall of ballroom music.

A strange feeling overtook him. He could close his eyes and imagine it was fifteen years ago and he was still a teenager, already in bed while his parents partied on into the night with their friends from South America.

He passed three or four hours up there. The commotion began to die down, and as the evening wore on, he went to the window and watched the guests depart in their Suburbans and Lincoln Towncars. They were all the same, dolled up in flowing pink dresses and elaborate tuxedo jackets.

A braying laugh filtered up from the front path, and Terry’s skin crawled. Who were these people? Mostly Miranda’s friends. No, mostly her parents’ friends. They hadn’t known anyone here, and everyone else had been too cheap or too far away to make the trip.

He was in bed by the time he heard Miranda’s feet on the stairs. He listened to her pad softly around the second floor, searching for him, until at last, there was a tap on the guestroom door.

“Terry?” her muffled voice asked. “Are you in there?”

It frightened him how much he didn’t want to answer. This was the woman with whom he was going to spend the rest of his life, starting tomorrow, and the revulsion he felt was

enough to bring the tears back. He blinked them away and got up from the bed.

She looked haggard. Her dress was rumpled, and there were a few smudges of cake where she had been clumsy and dropped them at the dinner table. She smiled up at him, but the smile faded when she did not see it mirrored. "What's the matter, sweetie?" she asked, and because he could think of no other way to answer, he told her:

"Nerves." It was a lie.

They spent an hour in front of a dying fire, surrounded by dirty dishes and shreds of wrapping paper. It had been the party for the acquaintances, the party for the guests who weren't guests at the real party.

Terry could sense that she was disappointed in him. Their conversation was light and superficial, the same way she had been talking to strangers the entire night. He felt her disapproval growing, and with it, his own sense of helplessness. Was this what it was going to be like for the next seventy years of his life? She would urge him to open up to her, and he would look back at her with blank hopelessness. For her, he had no words.

After a while, she said that she was tired. He kissed her on the cheek and she went upstairs to the master bedroom. He listened to her footsteps on the old wooden beams overhead until they stopped altogether and it was silent again.

He sat and watched the last glowing embers of the fire smolder to ash, and then he rose and went into the bathroom to mutilate himself.

There was something beautiful about blood on white porcelain. He stopped with the knife still in his thigh and went to get a disposable camera one of the guests had left behind. It had dried by the time he got back, though, gone brown and sticky.

He cried again and then bandaged himself up, rinsed off the knife, and left it in the dish drainer next to the cake plate. It ached when he walked, and he clung to that like a

rock. It was something solid, something he could focus and hold onto.

Terry climbed upstairs, but when he reached the second floor, he just kept climbing. He could hear his father's feet in his own footsteps, and with them the echoed laughter of the brothers and sisters he would never see again. Tomorrow, he was signing his life away. He was pledging himself to another human being. Why was he lonelier than ever?

It was warm in the attic, the way it had always been, even in the winter. Only one of the lights worked, and there were spider webs everywhere. He eased the trap door shut and then he sat on it and vomited into a hatbox his mother had brought back with her from Tibet. He had done it in there before; it smelled like lima beans.

He was deathly tired, but he couldn't sleep. He began opening old boxes and picking through papers he had written for high school, junior high, grade school. He found a drawing he had made in kindergarten, and then, beneath it, he found an old photograph of someone he didn't recognize.

The paper was thin and dusty in his fingers. He turned it over and squinted at the hand-written inscription on the back: *Hacker 19-?*

That was strange. He thought he had been through every box in this attic at one point or another, but he had never seen the picture before.

It gave him nightmares the rest of the night. And then it was supposed to be the happiest day of his life.

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As soon as Detective Joseph Malloy put down the telephone, it rang again. And again. And again. He had not realized he knew that many people in the department, but every five minutes, another voice he had forgotten would greet him on the other end of the line.

He ducked his head out into reception, where Claire was stuffing something in the file cabinet, the way she had been doing for the last two decades. “Can you take my calls for a little bit?” he asked her. “I need to grab lunch.”

She smiled and nodded at him. “Phone’s been ringing off the hook, huh?”

“Don’t tell anyone, but the last day on the job is the busiest you’ll ever have.”

“Not all of us are as popular as you.”

“Just you wait.”

He grabbed his coat and was almost out the door when the phone rang again. Claire caught up with him at the end of the hallway.

“Now the point about you answering the phone,” he told her, “was that I wouldn’t have to worry about it for thirty minutes.”

“It’s your wife,” she said. “I thought you might want to talk to her.”

Malloy paused. The elevator was three steps away. His stomach growled, and then his conscience kicked in and he turned and followed her back to the office. Jean had always hated it when his work came between them, and today, he didn’t have any excuses.

Tinny music was lilting through the receiver when he picked it up, and as soon as he answered, he could hear Jean and some of her friends burst into a resounding rendition of *For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow*. Malloy cracked a thin smile. That was Jean in a nutshell. Call him three hours before he would see her anyway to make a little gesture that, in truth, was more annoying than anything else. But it was sweet. He should just appreciate that she felt like expending the energy on him, he supposed.

When she was done, she came on the line, all out of breath. “How’s work, sweetie?” she asked. She didn’t sound a day older than when they had taken their first ride on the ferry together, forty-eight years ago.

“Busy,” he said. “I was just on my way to lunch.”

“Oh.” Not disappointed. She was too excited to be disappointed, and that touched him even more. “Okay, well, I’ll let you go. I just wanted to say hi and to tell you that the Mulligans are going to be over this afternoon for drinks whenever you can extract yourself from that cave of an office you work in.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and the people from the dealership called, and they’ve got the piece the factory left out. We can snap it right in on the dashboard—there’s no need for professional installation. I was going to pick it up this morning, but I didn’t know if you had any questions or if you wanted to go.”

“No, that’s okay.”

She chatted several minutes longer than there was any call for, and then, at last, they agreed to hang up. He flashed another smile at Claire on the way out and told her this time, he didn’t want to hear from anyone until he had cleared at least two or three bites of lunch.

The cafeteria was bustling with the usual noontime crowd, and so he did not notice the strange man by the coffee cart until they were practically standing on each other. He nudged Malloy lightly with an elbow and then stuck out a hand when Joseph turned.

“Detective Malloy?” he said.

Malloy looked him up and down. Too cheaply-dressed to be from Internal Affairs, but too expensive for insurance or reception. Warily, he took the man’s hand before grabbing a tray and diving into the lunch line. “What do you need, son?” He shuddered at the sound of his own voice. Some of the guys had told him he should try using expressions like that, because they made him sound more his age. But he hated his age, almost as much as he hated sounding it.

“Detective, I’m Kelsey Robins. They just brought me out here from the city. I guess I’m going to be inhabiting your office for a while.”

Malloy blinked. This was his replacement? Somehow, it wasn't what he had expected. Kelsey was thin, tall, a little awkward, but muscular where it counted, and as tan as a potato. He was too good for a small-town assignment like this one. He belonged off in vice or busting the drug lords at the downtown precinct.

"Hi, Mr. Robins," Malloy said, and scooped a shrink-wrapped turkey sandwich off of the pile. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh, please, Kelsey. Hell, it's my first day and your last. There's no need to be formal."

They made their way to a table—the two of them—and all the while, Malloy was wondering how long he was going to have to deal with this guy. It was his last afternoon here, just under three hours before he could clock out forever. How long would it take for those three hours to pass?

Robins had grabbed a small fruit cup from the cafeteria line, and when he had finished it off, he sat back in his chair and stared intensely at Malloy for a few moments. "Look," he said, "it's been great meeting you. I'd heard quite a bit, and I was curious what kind of person I'd be stepping in for."

Malloy expelled a silent sigh of relief. So this was over. No more awkward half-conversations about the weather, or past cases, no advice from the seasoned veteran. He could just go back to enjoying his lunch and-

"But the reason I came down here..."

*Stop*, Malloy thought. He didn't want to hear any reasons. He didn't want there to be any reasons. Couldn't someone just say hi and then retire in peace?

"They forwarded me all of your active files." Kelsey was saying. He had a Palm Pilot out and was clicking through some notes he must have taken in the morning. "Most of them seem pretty straightforward. I mean, hell, nobody solves everything, right? Our department back in the city had seventeen open cases, and that was just from the past two years. But there was this one that kind of had me scratching my head. I thought maybe you could shed a little light on it?"

“Why didn’t you stop by my office?” Malloy asked.  
*This is my lunch hour, for God’s sake*, he thought silently to himself.

“Oh, I tried. Claire—your receptionist—Claire said that you weren’t seeing anyone else, and that you’d been busy on the phone all morning.”

“Claire was right.”

“So if you could just look at this one file...?”

Malloy sighed. He shouldn’t have left the protection of his office. He should have stayed right there on the phone and sent Claire out to pick something up from Subway or Wendy’s.

“I really don’t know...” Malloy said, but Kelsey was already getting out a few folded pieces of paper.

“I don’t think it’ll take any time at all,” he told Malloy. “I just couldn’t find any information on it, and I thought you could point me in the right direction.”

He flatted out one of the documents, and Malloy saw that it was a Xerox of a photograph. It had originally been in color, so the details were grainy and smudged, but when Malloy turned it around, he could pick out a young woman’s delicate features and some kind of foliage in the background—probably a portrait studio’s props.

When he looked back up, Kelsey was staring at him. He shrugged. “So? Where’s the rest?”

“Oh, that’s it.”

“What do you mean, that’s it?”

“That’s all there was. See, that’s why I’m confused. It was in your files under the name, *Hacker*, so, I mean, it didn’t just fall from someone’s corkboard. And normally I wouldn’t bother you about something like this, only they’re all telling me you and Mrs. Malloy are taking off with your RV before the end of the week and you won’t even have a phone, so I thought I’d just see if you knew what this was while I still had the chance.”

Malloy shrugged. “Sorry, Mr. Robins. I have no idea.”

“Kelsey, please.” He smiled and took the paper back. His eyes flitted over it one more time before he refolded it and

shoved it back into his pocket. “Okay, Detective Malloy. Sorry to bother you during your lunch break, and it was truly an honor to meet you.” He pushed back from the table and stood, sticking out a hand.

Numbly, Malloy took it. Kelsey dropped a card on the table next to his empty fruit cup. “If you happen to remember anything about her, I’d love to hear the details. I’m just curious. Stuff like this always bugged the shit out of me. I’m a details guy, I guess.” He sniffed and then nodded. “Have a good trip, Mr. Malloy. See you around, maybe.”

*Prick*, Malloy thought. *I’m a details guy, unlike this old fart who keeps bad files and lets things slip through the cracks.* And what the hell was with the picture, anyway? He couldn’t remember ever opening a file for a woman named Hacker, and her face had not looked remotely familiar.

All the way back up to the office, he couldn’t stop thinking of her. It was stupid, because there was nothing to come up with—he wasn’t going to recall who she was no matter how much he scoured his memory. Damn Kelsey Robins for bringing something like this up on the last day of his career. Why couldn’t he just retire in peace like every other cop in the world?

There had been fifteen calls while he was at lunch, and all of them wanted to hear from him before he left the office. If he’d been this busy throughout his career, he would have burned out less than a month into the job.

Malloy plunked himself down behind the desk, picked up the phone, and started playing socialite, but his mind was no longer with the old friends and distant acquaintances who answered.

There was something about her expression, something about the intensity with which she had been staring at the camera. He would see her eyes in his wife’s eyes when she picked him up from work that afternoon, and again when he tried to sleep that night. She plagued him. She would not leave.

Who was she, and how had she gotten into his file cabinet?

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They were supposed to have turned the water off to this wing of the building last summer. Debbie Wendell shook her head and mumbled obscenities to herself as she went for her cell phone and strode back down the corridor the way she had come. The contractors all looked at each other and then she heard their footsteps in her wake. Behind them, the little trickle was getting louder, larger, more insistent. If they didn't get this taken care of in the next five minutes, there was going to be a very big, expensive mess, and she, for one, sure as hell wasn't going to be paying the bill when the corporate lackeys started looking for scapegoats.

"Wendell," she growled into the phone when the meek receptionist answered for Mr. Baines. "Tyler's office."

"May I say who's--"

"Wendell," she repeated. "You want me to write it down and fax it to you?"

There was a hesitant pause and then the soft jazz kicked in. On hold. On fucking hold. She stopped abruptly and turned to stare out the floor-to-ceiling window and the planes as they taxied down the runway. Their fins were silhouetted against the early morning sky like shark tails circling in frigid water.

"Debbie?" Tyler sounded tired. He had probably been in a meeting of some sort, but both she and the receptionist had known that it wouldn't be pretty if she were made to wait. "Look, this isn't a good time," he said when she let him dangle for a few minutes.

"Then shut off the goddamn water to Concourse A like you were supposed to six months ago."

"The...the what?"

“We’re taking a bath down here, Tyler. You want all of the international passengers to take it with us, or you want to do your fucking job and make it stop?”

“Hold on.”

Jazz music.

Debbie sighed and sank into one of the chairs that had been cleared from the waiting area and stacked alongside the runway windows. Fifteen years and this job was starting to lose its appeal. Not that it had ever had too much in the first place. It was a good paycheck—more than most people thought—and it had let her put Nina through college. It had also given her the advantage when she felt like spending a night at one of the rougher bars. Guys didn’t hit on chicks with biceps unless they genuinely had some way of impressing them. So far, none of them had.

Tyler was back. He fed her a line of bullshit and then said that the water would be off within ten minutes. *Great*, she thought. That only meant one or two heated conversations with airport personnel instead of a dozen. She didn’t know what the point was. They were demolishing the whole wing anyway. It was only because the airport was federally-managed that they gave a shit about all of the proper inspections and permits. They had to check three times for asbestos and then half a dozen other random chemicals and architectural treatments Debbie had never heard of.

She slapped the cell phone shut and jammed it back in her jeans pocket. The crew was watching her in rapt silence when she rounded on them. “Okay,” she said, “it’s going to be ten minutes, which means we can get some of this other bullshit done in the meantime. You two,” she pointed, because honestly, she’d never been compelled to learn anyone’s names. “There’s a bunch of old wiring behind that wall that we’re supposed to untangle and remove before we lay in with the sledgehammers. Make it happen. The rest of you should start pulling floor and ceiling tiles.

We've got to isolate the ventilation ducts, because apparently they might be able to use them in the new wing."

"Aww, but they're by the window," one of the men said.

Debbie scowled at him. "You got a problem with a view?"

"He's got a problem with the wife who forgot to wash his shorts this morning and left him with nothing but long pants," another man quipped. "Sun's pretty hot right about now."

"Hey, I got a cousin who has an allergic reaction to the sun," the first man whined.

"You got an allergic reaction getting your ass kicked?" Debbie growled.

The two men sniggered and split up, scattering in different directions. She stood for a few moments and just watched. It always amused people who happened to catch her crew at work that she could so effectively govern men who looked about as friendly and obedient as a pack of wolves. There were online courses you could take to build your confidence and try to achieve the kind of respect she had garnered, but in the end, she knew the secret formula – be pissed off, strong, and scary, and people would do what you wanted. A few thousand years after mankind's earliest days, and might very much still made right.

"Wendell!" one of the guys called.

She scanned the terminal and found him waving at her from the other end, away from the windows. He was Bruce, if she was remembering correctly—mustache, hair to his elbows, last runner-up in any beauty contest she'd ever judge.

She nodded, held up a finger. Let him wait. If you came right over when they snapped their fingers, they'd learn that they could make you do their bidding. She pulled out her cell phone and pretended to be on a call for a few minutes before finally sauntering over to him.

“What is it?” she asked. “I’m busy.”

“We found some old stuff in one of the vents.”

“I don’t give a shit. Either give it to the Port Authority if you think they’d want it or throw it away, cause I sure don’t.”

“But it’s antiques or something.”

She gave him a look. “Who do you think I am? I don’t care what century it’s from. It’s in my fucking construction site, and that means it’s in the way.”

Bruce shrugged. “Okay.” He knelt and bustled around in a cloud of old plaster.

Debbie was just turning back to the center of the terminal when she caught a glimpse of the object he was removing. It was a box—a jewelry box, perhaps—wooden, ornately carved, genuinely beautiful.

She strode over to his side and took it from him. It was heavy in her hands. Probably worth a fortune. What the hell was this doing in an airport ventilation duct?