# Indelible

# Karin Slaughter

## CHAPTER ONE

### 8:55 A.M.

Well, look what the cat dragged in," Marla Simms bellowed, giving Sara a pointed look over her silver-rimmed bifocals. The secretary for the police station held a magazine in her arthritic hands, but she set it aside, indicating she had plenty of time to talk.

Sara forced some cheer into her voice, though she had purposefully timed her visit for Marla's coffee break. "Hey, Marla. How're you doing?"

The old woman stared for a beat, a tinge of disapproval putting a crease in her naturally down-turned lips. Sara forced herself not to squirm. Marla had taught the children's Sunday school class at the Primitive Baptist from the day they opened the front doors, and she could still put the fear of God into anyone in town who'd been born after 1952.

She kept her eyes locked on Sara. "Haven't seen you around here in a while."

"Hm," Sara offered, glancing over Marla's shoulder, trying to see into Jeffrey's office. His door was open but he was not behind his desk. The squad room was empty, which meant he was probably in the back. Sara knew she should just walk behind the counter and find him herself—she had done it hundreds of times before—but sur- vivor's instinct kept her from crossing that bridge without first paying the troll.

Marla sat back in her chair, her arms folded. "Nice day out," she said, her tone still casual.

Sara glanced out the door at Main Street, where heat made the asphalt look wavy. The air this morning was humid enough to open every pore on her body. "Sure is."

"And don't you look pretty this morning," Marla continued, indicating the linen dress Sara had chosen after going through nearly every item of clothing in her closet. "What's the occasion?"

"Nothing special," Sara lied. Before she knew what she was doing, she started to fidget with her briefcase, shifting from one foot to the other like she was four instead of nearly forty.


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A glimmer of victory flashed in the older woman's eyes. She drew out the silence a bit more before asking, "How's your mama and them?"

"Good," Sara answered, trying not to sound too circumspect. She wasn't naive enough to believe that her private life was no one else's business—in a county as small as Grant, Sara could barely sneeze without the phone ringing from up the street with a helpful "Bless you"—but she would be damned if she'd make it easy for them to gather their information.

"And your sister?"

Sara was about to respond when Brad Stephens saved her by tripping through the front door. The young patrolman caught himself before he fell flat on his face, but the momentum popped his hat off his head and onto the floor at Sara's feet. His gun belt and nightstick flopped under his arms like extra appendages. Behind him, a gaggle of prepubescent children squawked with laughter at his less-thangraceful entrance.

"Oh," Brad said, looking at Sara, then back to the kids, then at Sara again. He picked up his hat, brushing it off with more care than was warranted. She imagined he could not decide which was more embarrassing: eight 10-year-olds laughing at his clumsiness or his former pediatrician fighting an obvious smile of amusement.

Apparently, the latter was worse. He turned back to the group, his voice deeper than usual as if to assert some authority. "This, of course, is the station house, where we do business. Police business. Uh, and we're in the lobby now." Brad glanced at Sara. To call the area where they stood a lobby was a bit of a stretch. The room was barely ten feet by eight, with a cement block wall opposite the glass door at the entrance. A row of photographs showing various squads in the Grant County police force lined the wall to Sara's right, a large portrait in the center showing Mac Anders, the only police officer in the history of the force who had been killed in the line of duty.

Across from the portrait gallery, Marla stood sentry behind a tall beige laminate counter that separated visitors from the squad room. She was not a naturally short woman, but age had made her so by crooking her body into a nearly perfect question mark. Her glasses were usually halfway down the bridge of her nose, and Sara, who wore glasses to read, was always tempted to push them back up. Not that Sara would ever do such a thing. For all Marla knew about everybody and their neighbor—and their dog—in town, not much was known about her. She was a widow with no children. Her husband had died in the Second World War. She had always lived on Hemlock, which was two streets over from Sara's parents. She knitted and she taught Sunday school and worked full-time at the station answering phones and trying to make sense of the mountains of paperwork. These facts hardly offered great insight into Marla Simms. Still, Sara always thought there had to be more to the life of a woman who had lived some eighty-odd years, even if she'd lived all of them in the same house where she had been born.


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Brad continued his tour of the station, pointing to the large, open room behind Marla. “Back there’s where the detectives and patrol officers like myself conduct their business . . . calls and whatnot. Talking to witnesses, writing reports, typing stuff into the computer, and, uh . . .” His voice trailed off as he finally noticed he was losing his audience. Most of the children could barely see over the counter. Even if they could, thirty empty desks spread out in rows of five with various sizes of filing cabinets between them were hardly attention grabbing. Sara imagined the kids were wishing they had stayed in school today.

Brad tried, “In a few minutes, I’ll show y’all the jail where we arrest people. Well, not arrest them,” he gave Sara a nervous glance, lest she point out his mistake. “I mean, this is where we take them after we arrest them. Not here, but back in the jail.”

Silence fell like a hammer, only to be interrupted by an infectious giggle that started in the back of the group. Sara, who knew most of the children from her practice at the children’s clinic, hushed a few with a sharp look. Marla took care of the rest, her swivel chair groaning with relief as she raised herself above the counter. The giggling shut off like a faucet.

Maggie Burgess, a child whose parents gave more credence to her opinion than any child of that age ought to be given, dared to say, “Hey, Dr. Linton,” in a grating, singsong voice.

Sara gave a curt nod. “Maggie.”

“Uh,” Brad began, a deep blush still souring his milk-white complexion. Sara was keenly aware of his gaze lingering a little too long on her bare legs. “Ya’ll . . . uh . . . y’all know Dr. Linton.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “Well, yeah,” she said, her sarcastic tone reviving a few giggles.

Brad pushed on. “Dr. Linton is also the medical examiner in town, in addition to being a pediatrician.” He spoke in an instructional tone, though surely the children already knew this. It was a subject of great humor on the bathroom walls at the elementary school. “I imagine she’s here on county business. Dr. Linton?”

“Yes,” Sara answered, trying to sound like Brad’s peer rather than someone who could remember him bursting into tears at the mere mention of a shot. “I’m here to talk to the Chief of Police about a case we’re working on.”

Maggie opened her mouth again, probably to repeat something horrible she had heard her mother say about Sara and Jeffrey’s relationship, but Marla’s chair squeaked and the child remained silent. Sara vowed she would go to church next Sunday just to thank the woman.

Marla’s voice was only slightly less condescending than Maggie’s when she told Sara, “I’ll go check-see if Chief Tolliver is available.”


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"Thank you," Sara answered, promptly changing her mind about church.

"Well, uh . . ." Brad began, brushing off his hat again. "Why don't we go on back now?" He opened one of the swinging doors in the counter to allow the children through, telling Sara, "Ma'am," giving her a polite nod before following them.

Sara walked over to the photographs on the wall, looking at all the familiar faces. Except for her time at college and working at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Sara had always lived in Grant County. Most of the men on the wall had played poker with her father at one time or another. The rest of them had been deacons at the church when Sara was a child or had policed football games back when she was a teenager and was desperately infatuated with Steve Mann, the captain of the Chess Club. Before Sara moved away to Atlanta, Mac Anders had caught Sara and Steve making out behind the House of Chilidogs. A few weeks later, his squad car rolled six times during a high-speed chase and Mac was dead.

Sara shuddered, a superstitious fear creeping along her skin like the legs of a spider. She moved on to the next picture, which showed the force when Jeffrey first took over the job as police chief. He had just come from Birmingham and everyone had been skeptical about the outsider, especially when he hired Lena Adams, Grant County's first female cop. Sara studied Lena in the group photograph. Her chin was tilted up in defiance and there was a glint of challenge in her eye. There were more than a dozen women patrolling now, but Lena would always be the first. The pressure must have been enormous, though Sara had never thought of Lena as a role model. As a matter of fact, there were several things about the other woman's personality that Sara found abhorrent.

"He said come on back." Marla stood at the swinging doors. "It's sad, isn't it?" she asked, indicating the picture of Mac Anders.

"I was at school when it happened."

"I won't even tell you what they did to that animal that chased him off the road." There was a note of approval in Marla's voice. Sara knew the suspect had been beaten so severely he'd lost an eye. Ben Walker, the police chief at the time, was a very different cop from Jeffrey.

Marla held open the doors for her. "He's back in interrogation doing some paperwork."

"Thank you," Sara said, taking one more look at Mac before walking through.

The station house had been built in the mid-1930s when the cities of Heartsdale, Madison, and Avondale had consolidated their police and fire service into the county. The building had been a feed store co-op, but the city bought it cheap when the last of the local farms went bust. All the character had been drained from the building during the renovation, and not


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much had been done to help the decor in the decades that followed. The squad room was nothing more than a long rectangle, with Jeffrey's office on one side and the bathroom on the other. Dark fake paneling still reeked of nicotine from before the county's antismoking policy. The drop ceiling looked dingy no matter how many times the inserts were replaced. The tile floor was made of asbestos and Sara always held her breath when she walked over the cracked portion by the bathroom. Even without the tile, she would have held her breath near the bathroom. Nowhere was it more evident that the Grant County police force was still predominantly male than in the squad room's unisex bathroom.

She muscled open the heavy fire door that separated the squad room from the rest of the building. A newer section had been built onto the back of the station fifteen years ago when the mayor had realized they could make some money holding prisoners for nearby overburdened counties. A thirty-cell jail block, a conference room, and the interrogation room had seemed luxurious at the time, but age had done its work and despite a recent fresh coat of paint, the newer areas looked just as worn-down as the old ones.

Sara's heels clicked across the floor as she walked down the long hallway, then stopped outside the interrogation room to straighten her dress and buy herself some time. She had not been this nervous around her ex-husband in a long while, and she hoped it did not show as she entered the room.

Jeffrey sat at a long table, stacks of papers spread over the surface as he took notes on a legal pad. His coat was off, his sleeves rolled up. He did not glance up when she came in, but he must have been watching, because when Sara started to close the door, he said, "Don't."

She put her briefcase on the table and waited for him to look up. He didn't, and she was torn between throwing her briefcase at his head and throwing herself at his feet. While these two conflicting emotions had been par for the course throughout the nearly fifteen years they had known each other, it was usually Jeffrey prostrating himself in front of Sara, not the other way around. After four years of divorce, they had finally fallen back into a relationship. Three months ago, he had asked her to marry him again, and his ego could not abide her rejection, no matter how many times she explained her reasons. They had not seen each other outside of work since, and Sara was running out of ideas.

Withholding an exasperated sigh, she said, "Jeffrey?"

"Just leave the report there," he said, nodding toward an empty corner on the table as he underlined something on the legal pad.

"I thought you might want to go over it."

"Was there anything unusual?" he asked, picking up another stack of papers, still not looking at her.

"I found a map in her lower bowel that leads to buried treasure."


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He did not take the bait. “Did you put that in the report?”

“Of course not,” she teased. “I’m not splitting that kind of money with the county.”

Jeffrey gave her a sharp look that said he didn’t appreciate her humor. “That’s not very respectful to the deceased.”

Sara felt a flash of shame but she tried not to show it.

“What’s the verdict?”

“Natural causes,” Sara told him. “The blood and urine came back clean. There were no remarkable findings during the physical exam. She was ninety-eight years old. She died peacefully in her sleep.”

“Good.”

Sara watched him write, waiting for him to realize she was not going to leave. He had a beautiful, flowing script, the kind you would never expect from an ex-jock and especially from a cop. Part of her had fallen in love with him the first time she had seen his handwriting.

She shifted from one foot to the other, waiting.

“Sit down,” he finally relented, holding out his hand for the report. Sara did as she was told, giving him the slim file.

He scanned her notes. “Pretty straightforward.”

“I’ve already talked to her kids,” Sara told him, though “kids” hardly seemed appropriate considering that the woman’s youngest child was nearly thirty years older than Sara. “They know they were grasping at straws.”

“Good,” he repeated, signing off on the last page. He tossed it onto the corner of the table and capped his pen. “Is that all?”

“Mama says hey.”

He seemed reluctant when he asked, “How’s Tess?”

Sara shrugged, because she wasn’t exactly sure how to answer. Her relationship with her sister seemed to be deteriorating as rapidly as her one with Jeffrey. Instead, she asked, “How long are you going to keep this up?”

He purposefully misunderstood her, indicating the paperwork as he spoke. “I’ve got to have it all done before we go to trial next month.”

“That’s not what I was talking about and you know it.”


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"I don't think you have a right to use that tone with me." He sat back in the chair. She could see that he was tired, and his usual easy smile was nowhere to be seen.

She asked, "Are you sleeping okay?"

"Big case," he said, and she wondered if that was really what was keeping him up at night. "What do you want?"

"Can't we just talk?"

"About what?" He rocked his chair back. When she did not answer, he prompted, "Well?"

"I just want to—"

"What?" he interrupted, his jaw set. "We've talked this through a hundred times. There's not a whole lot more to say."

"I want to see you."

"I told you I'm buried in this case."

"So, when it's over . . . ?"

"Sara."

"Jeffrey," she countered. "If you don't want to see me, just say it. Don't use a case as an excuse. We've both been buried deeper than this before and still managed to spend time with each other. As I recall, it's what makes this crap"—she indicated the mounds of paperwork— "bearable."

He dropped his chair with a thud. "I don't see the point."

She gave humor another stab. "Well, the sex, for one."

"I can get that anywhere."

Sara raised an eyebrow, but suppressed the obvious comment. The fact that Jeffrey could and sometimes did get sex anywhere was the reason she had divorced him in the first place.

He picked up his pen to resume writing, but Sara snatched it from his hand. She tried to keep the desperation out of her voice as she asked, "Why do we have to get married again for this to work?"

He looked off to the side, clearly annoyed.

She reminded him, "We were married before and it practically ruined us."

"Yeah," he said. "I remember."


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She played her trump card. “You could rent out your house to someone from the college.”

He paused a second before asking, “Why would I do that?”

“So you could move in with me.”

“And live in sin?”

She laughed. “Since when did you become religious?”

“Since your father put the fear of God into me,” he shot back, his tone completely devoid of humor. “I want a wife, Sara, not a fuckbuddy.”

She felt the cut of his words. “Is that what you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” he told her, his tone something of an apology. “I’m tired of being tied to that string you just yank when you feel lonely.”

She opened her mouth but could not speak.

He shook his head, apologizing. “I didn’t mean that.”

“You think I’m here making a fool of myself because I’m lonely?”

“I don’t know anything right now, except that I’ve got a lot of work to do.” He held out his hand. “Can I have my pen back?”

She gripped it tightly. “I want to be with you.”

“You’re with me now,” he said, reaching over to retrieve his pen.

She put her other hand around his, holding him there. “I miss you,” she said. “I miss being with you.”

He gave a halfhearted shrug, but did not pull away.

She pressed her lips to his fingers, smelling ink and the oatmeal lotion he used when he thought no one was looking. “I miss your hands.”

He kept staring.

She brushed his thumb with her lips. “Don’t you miss me?”

He tilted his head to the side, giving another indefinite shrug.

“I want to be with you. I want to . . .” She looked over her shoulder again, making certain no one was there. She lowered her voice to barely more than a whisper and offered to do something with him that any self-respecting prostitute would charge double for.


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Jeffrey's lips parted, shock registering in his eyes. His hand tightened around hers. "You stopped doing that when we got married."

"Well . . ." She smiled. "We're not married anymore, are we?"

He seemed to be thinking it over when a loud knock came at the open door. It might as well have been a gunshot from Jeffrey's reaction. He jerked his hand back and stood up.

Frank Wallace, Jeffrey's second in command, said, "Sorry."

Jeffrey let his irritation show, though Sara could not guess if it was for her or Frank's benefit. "What is it?"

Frank glanced at the phone on the wall and stated the obvious. "Your extension's off the hook."

Jeffrey waited.

"Marla told me to tell you there's some kid in the lobby asking for you." He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Hey, Sara."

She started to return the greeting but stopped at the sight of him. He looked dead on his feet. "Are you all right?"

Frank put his hand to his stomach, a sour look on his face. "Bad Chinese."

She stood, putting her hand to his cheek. His skin was clammy. "You're probably dehydrated," she told him, putting her fingers to his wrist to check his pulse. "Are you getting enough fluids?"

He shrugged.

She stared at the second hand on her watch. "Throwing up? Diarrhea?"

He shifted uncomfortably over her last question. "I'm okay," he said, but he obviously wasn't. "You look real nice today."

"I'm glad somebody noticed," Sara said, giving Jeffrey a sideways glance.

Jeffrey tapped his fingers on the table, still annoyed. "Go on home, Frank. You look like shit."

Frank's relief was obvious.

Sara added, "If this isn't better tomorrow, call me."

He nodded again, telling Jeffrey, "Don't forget about the kid in the lobby."

"Who is it?"


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"Something Smith. I didn't catch . . ." He put a hand to his stomach and made a sick sound. He turned to leave, managing a garbled "Sorry."

Jeffrey waited until Frank was out of earshot to say, "I have to do everything around here."

"He's obviously not well."

"It's Lena's first day back," Jeffrey said, referring to Frank's ex-partner. "She's supposed to be in at ten."

"And?"

"You run into Matt yet? He tried to call in sick, too, but I told him to get his sorry ass in here."

"You think two senior detectives gave themselves food poisoning so they wouldn't have to see Lena?"

Jeffrey walked over to the phone and put the receiver back in the cradle. "I've been here over fifteen years and never seen Matt Hogan eat Chinese."

He had a point, but Sara wanted to give both men the benefit of the doubt. No matter what he said about her, Frank obviously cared for Lena. They had worked together for nearly a decade. Sara knew from personal experience that you could not spend that kind of time with someone and just walk away.

Jeffrey pressed the speaker button, then dialed in an extension. "Marla?"

There was a series of clicking noises as she picked up the receiver. "Yessir?"

"Has Matt shown up yet?"

"Not yet. I'm a little worried what with him being sick and all."

"Tell him I'm looking for him as soon as he walks in the door," Jeffrey ordered. "Is there someone waiting for me?"

She lowered her voice. "Yes. He's kind of impatient."

"I'll be there in a second." He turned the speaker off, mumbling, "I don't have time for this."

"Jeff—"

"I need to see who this is," he said, walking out of the room.

Sara followed him down the hallway, practically running to keep up. "If I break my ankle in these heels . . ."


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He glanced down at her shoes. “Did you think you could just waltz in here whoring yourself out and I’d beg you to come back?”

Embarrassment ignited her temper. “Why is it you call it whoring myself out when I want to do it, but when I don’t want to and I do anyway, all of a sudden it’s sexy?”

He stopped at the fire door, resting his hand on the long handle. “That’s not fair.”

“You think so, too, Dr. Freud?”

“I’m not playing around here, Sara.”

“Do you think I am?”

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” he said, and there was a hardness around his eyes that sent a cold chill through her. “I can’t keep living like this.”

She put her hand on his arm, saying, “Wait.” When he stopped, she forced herself to say, “I love you.”

He gave her a flippant “Thanks.”

“Please,” she whispered. “We don’t need a piece of paper to tell us how we feel.”

“The thing you keep missing,” he told her, yanking open the door, “is that I do.”

She started to follow him into the squad room, but pride kept her feet rooted to the floor. A handful of patrolmen and detectives were starting their shifts, sitting at their desks as they wrote up reports or made calls. She could see Brad and his group of kids congregating around the coffeemaker, where he was probably regaling them with the brand of filter they used or the number of scoops it took to make a pot.

There were two young men in the lobby, one of them leaning against the back wall, the other standing in front of Marla. Sara took the standing one to be Jeffrey’s visitor. Smith was young, probably Brad’s age, and dressed in a quilted black jacket that was zipped closed despite the late August heat. His head was shaved and from what she could make of his body under the heavy coat, he was fit and well muscled. He kept scanning the room, his eyes furiously darting around, never resting his gaze on one person for long. He added the front door to his rotation every second time, checking the street. There was definitely something military in his bearing, and for some reason, his general demeanor put Sara on edge.

She looked around the room, taking in what Smith was seeing. Jeffrey had stopped at one of the desks to help a patrolman. He slid his paddle holster to his back as he sat on the edge of the desk and typed something into the computer. Brad was still talking over by the coffeemaker, his hand resting


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on the top of the mace spray in his belt. She counted five more cops, all of them busy writing reports or entering information into their computers. A sense of danger coursed through Sara's body like a bolt of lightning. Everything in her line of vision became too sharply focused.

The front door made a sucking sound as it opened and Matt Hogan walked in. Marla said, "There you are. We've been waiting for you."

The young man put his hand inside his coat, and Sara screamed, "Jeffrey!"

They all turned to look at her, but Sara was watching Smith. In one fluid motion he pulled out a sawed-off shotgun, pointed it at Matt's face, and squeezed both triggers.

Blood and brain sprayed onto the front door as if from a highpressure hose. Matt fell back against the glass, the pane cracking straight up the center but not breaking, his face completely blown away. Children started to scream and Brad fell on them en masse, pushing them down to the ground. Gunfire went wild and one of the patrolmen collapsed in front of Sara, a large hole in his chest. His gun discharged on impact, skidding across the floor. Around her, glass flew as family photographs and personal items shot off desks. Computers popped, sending up the acrid smell of burning plastic. Papers floated through the air in a flurry, and the sound of weapons firing was so intense that Sara's ears felt as if they were bleeding.

"Get out!" Jeffrey screamed, just as Sara felt a sharp sting on her face. She put her hand to her cheek where a piece of shrapnel had grazed the flesh. She was kneeling on the floor but could not remember how she had gotten there. She darted behind a filing cabinet, her throat feeling as if she had swallowed acid.

"Go!" Jeffrey was crouched behind a desk, the muzzle of his gun a constant burst of white as he tried to give her cover. A large boom shook the front of the building, then another.

From behind the fire door, Frank screamed, "This way!" pointing his gun around the jamb, shooting blindly toward the front lobby. A patrolman slammed open the door, exposing Frank as he ran to safety. On the other side of the room, a second cop was shot trying to reach the group of children, his face a mask of pain as he slumped against a filing cabinet. Smoke and the smell of gunpowder filled the air, and still more firepower came from the front lobby. Fear seized Sara as she recognized the snare-drum tat-tat-tat of an automatic weapon. The killers had come prepared for a shoot-out.

"Dr. Linton!" someone screamed. Seconds later, Sara felt a pair of small hands clinging to her neck. Maggie Burgess had managed to break loose, and instinctively, Sara wrapped her own body around the girl's. Jeffrey saw this, and he took out his ankle holster, giving Sara the signal to run as soon as he started firing. She slipped off her high heels, waiting for what seemed like hours until Jeffrey raised his head above the desk he was hiding behind and started shooting with both guns. Sara bolted toward the fire door and


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threw the child to Frank. Floor tiles splintered and exploded in front of her as bullets sprayed, and she backed up on her hands and feet until she was safely behind the filing cabinet again.

Sara's hands moved wildly as she checked to see if she had been shot. There was blood all over her, but she knew it was not her own. Frank cracked open the door again. Bullets popped off the heavygauge steel and he returned fire, sticking his hand around the edge and shooting.


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