One day Tessa was standing on Chloe’s porch, looking scared. Two days later she was dead. Chloe can’t shake the thought that she didn’t ask Tessa what was wrong, even though she’d seemed frightened.

Now she has to find out who might have wanted Tessa out of the way. And she can’t help wondering what it was, the night Tessa came for help, that had her scared to death...
Chapter 1

I opened the front door on the third ring of the doorbell and found Tessa Nixon standing on my front porch, biting her lower lip and clutching a thick binder and two textbooks to her chest as if they were armor. She peered at me with eyes as blue as a summer sky and then peeked over my shoulder, as if she expected or maybe hoped to see someone in the house behind me. She was out of luck. I was alone.

“Can I help you?” I said, after I got tired of waiting for her to speak. I felt like a counter clerk at a fast-food outlet. *Do you want fries with that?*

“I — I was wondering if maybe . . .” Her voice trailed off. She peeked over my shoulder again. Then she glanced back in the direction she had come, up at the gravel road that ran past our house. That seemed to hold her attention for a while, even though there was nothing up there except a silver-gray car that was slowing as if it were going to stop, but that in the end kept right on going.

“Uh, Tessa,” I said, tapping her on the shoulder, making sure she hadn’t forgotten I was there. And — I couldn’t help it — I also found myself wondering why Ross had been mooning over her for the past couple of weeks. Okay, so she was pretty, although when she turned back to me her cheeks had lost their healthy, cover-girl glow. If anything,
the pallor gave her a damsel-in-distress look that made her seem even prettier. Besides those annoyingly blue eyes, she had skin that teenage girls the world over would have killed for, a perfect, straight nose, plump lips swept with a shade of coral lipstick that, on her, looked completely natural, and thick, shoulder-length hair that shone gold in the late afternoon sunlight. And that was just for starters. She was also tall and slim — you know, flat tummy, hint of hipbones, long legs. In her black jeans, red sweater and cropped black jacket, she looked as if she had just stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine. But beauty is only skin deep, right? And from where I was standing, Tessa Nixon, pleasing to the eye though she was, didn’t seem to have much going on upstairs. When she finally managed to turn her attention back to me, she looked a little blank, as if she couldn’t remember who I was or why she was standing on my porch.

“No offense,” I said, “but I have a lot of homework to do. So if you don’t mind . . .” Hint, hint, Tessa.

“Your dad isn’t home, is he?”

I admit it, she floored me with that one. What did Tessa want with Levesque — who, by the way, is my stepfather, not my actual father. He’s also the police chief in the town of East Hastings, which I now call home.

“It’s four o’clock in the afternoon,” I told her.

I guess that was a little too oblique for her. She looked baffled.

“He’s at work,” I said, by way of clarification. If I knew Levesque, he was probably reviewing the file on the convenience store holdup that had happened ten days ago. The store’s owner had been killed and the clerk, a seventeen-year-old kid, had been so seriously hurt that he was in a coma in the hospital. I could imagine Levesque poring over that file. There was nothing he hated more than an unsolved robbery-homicide. “Have you tried the police station?” I said to Tessa.

Her eyes turned all liquid, and I could imagine how Ross would have reacted if she had flashed that look at him. Here’s a clue: think puddle. It didn’t melt me, though. Not much, anyway.

“He’ll be home this evening,” I said. Then I added, “Probably,” because, the fact is, you never know with cops. They’re pretty much famous for not being home for dinner every day and for having to dash out in the middle of the night to attend the scene of an accident or, more likely up here in East Hastings, to arrest someone on a drunk and disorderly on a Friday or Saturday night, or to chase down some tourist who had gotten lost in the middle of East Hastings Provincial Park.

“Okay,” Tessa said. Her voice was all whispery, like she was trying to be sexy or something, which, again, Ross would have lapped up like a kitten with a saucer of cream. “Okay, thanks.”

She turned and started back across the porch. When she reached the steps, I swung the door shut. Then I stood there for a moment, watching
her make her way down the steps, along the path
to the driveway, and then up to the road. I almost
opened the door again and called after her. I almost
asked, “Is everything okay, Tessa?” Almost. But I
didn’t.

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During my free period the next day, I ducked out
into the schoolyard to get a breath of fresh air.
The heat was still pumping through the school
ventilation system, but the weather outside had
forgotten how it was supposed to be behaving.
It was March first, but a couple of days ago the
weather had turned so warm that everyone
half-expected to see trees bursting into bud. They
didn’t, of course, and wouldn’t for another month or
so. But the snow had mostly melted and everybody
was strolling around with great big, goofy grins on
their faces, and who could blame them? It had been
a hard winter. I had shoveled more snow in the
past couple of months than I had the whole time I
lived in Montreal — where they have a pretty good
idea how to throw winter. I’m as concerned about
global warming as the next person, but I was glad
to have a break from the front-walk detail.

Judging from what was going on in the school-
yard, the unseasonable warmth had even sparked a
little spring fever. Off to one side of the football field,
Tessa Nixon and her boyfriend Jake Bailey were
pressed up against each other like wallpaper and
wall. They had caught everyone’s attention lately
with their long and loud series of lovers’ quarrels.

Now it looked like they were finally making up.
Good thing that Ross wasn’t around to see . . .

I don’t know what made me turn my head just
then, but I did. That’s when I saw Ross Jenkins,
editor of the school newspaper and the closest
thing I have to a best friend in East Hastings,
standing outside one of the school exits, staring
across the field at Tessa and Jake, and doing a
pretty good impression of a guy whose heart has
been broken into a million pieces. For a second or
two, his eyes were filled with longing — I guessed
he was looking at Tessa. Then longing was replaced
by hate and I knew he had switched his attention
to Jake.

I started toward him. I was going to slap him on
the back and say something like, “What did you
expect, Ross? Everyone knows she’s devoted to
Jake. You told me so yourself.” But before I got
there he wheeled around and went back into the
school, and I decided that maybe there were some
things that you had to figure out for yourself. In
Ross’s case, the problem wasn’t exactly in the
realm of higher mathematics. In fact, it was so two-
plus-two that your average first grader would have
shouted out the answer in one second flat. How
come, all of a sudden, the girl of your dreams sud-
denly turns her back on Mr. Handsome (that’s Jake
and, okay, so he’s also Mr. Not-Too-Bright, but then
she’s not exactly Ms. Brains-of-the-Universe) and
starts making eyes at you? Is it because: (a) She’s
finally, after all those years of living across the
street from you, realized that you and you alone are the man of her dreams? (b) She’s having a spat with Mr. Handsome and thinks the best way to teach him a lesson is to make him jealous? or (c) Her body has been invaded by an alien life form?

Everyone — and I include in that group myself, a relative newcomer and hardly the chronicler of local matters of the heart — knew that Tessa and Jake had been going together forever. Everyone also knew that this particular made-in-heaven match seemed to be headed straight in the opposite direction lately. I don’t know why Tessa and Jake were having problems and, frankly, I didn’t care, but even I had seen them screaming at each other in the schoolyard. I had seen Tessa slam her locker shut and pirouette away from Jake. I had seen Jake slam his fist into the very same locker so hard he dented it (without even wincing — that’s something you don’t forget, a guy who can take that kind of pain and not even flinch). And then, out of the blue, there was Tessa with her arm linked through Ross’s, and there was Ross, walking along the corridors of the school, his feet not even touching the ground. Don’t get me wrong. I like Ross. He’s a nice guy. But Tessa’s kind of guy? Look, there’s biology, but there’s also chemistry. Which one produces heat and light? So I felt bad that Ross, who must have thought that he had finally (miraculously) won Tessa’s heart, had to find out the hard way that he was dead wrong. And was there anything harder than seeing the girl you thought of as your very own kissing the guy you thought of as your arch-enemy? But, come on, Ross, there’s real and there’s make-believe. Tessa and Jake were real.

* * *

Right after school that day I headed down to the newspaper office. The East Hastings Regional High School newspaper, the Herald, was produced out of an office that occupied a part of the school basement, wedged in between the boiler room and the janitorial office/locker room. I was planning to beg for more time to get my newspaper article done — I had been assigned to gather and compile student opinions about the fact that now we all had to do forty hours of community service before we could graduate. Ross would be upset that I wanted more time. I don’t know why. The paper didn’t go to the printer until Friday afternoon. But Ross insisted that all copy, except the sports news, had to be in by Wednesday morning to give him enough time to “get it into shape.” My article wasn’t quite written yet. Okay, so I hadn’t even started to write it. I was going to promise to deliver it to him that evening at the latest, which would mean that it could still be included in the next edition of the paper, and Ross wouldn’t have to lose sleep wondering about a blank space on page three or four or whatever.

I was in a rush. I had decided to leave my announcement to the very end of lunch period so that I had a built-in excuse to duck out if Ross
started to lecture me — or worse, scold me. I guess my timing explained why there were so few people in the newspaper office. In fact, there were exactly two. Ross and Tessa. Neither of them noticed when I opened the door.

Tessa’s back was to me and she was shaking her head. Then she said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

Ross was facing me, but because he was one hundred percent concentrating on Tessa, he didn’t see me. Just before Tessa spoke, his face was filled with hope. It seemed to take him a heartbeat or two to process her words. Then his face sort of crumpled. You know the look, the same one you see on a little kid’s face just before he starts to cry. Then Ross did something stupid — he started to beg.

“No, Tessa?” Ross said. “It’ll be great, I promise. Please?” He looked desperate and needy — not a winning combination.

Tessa shook her head. “I can’t, Ross.”

“Is it Jake?” Ross said. “Is he giving you a hard time again? Is he harassing you?”

I thought about Tessa and Jake on the football field. What Jake had been doing hadn’t looked like harassment to me. Ross had been there too. He had been looking at the exact same scene. Levesque always says that any cop who has ever interviewed more than one witness to the same incident knows that different people see the same thing differently. I hadn’t realized until just this minute how wildly different those observations could be.

“I can talk to him, if you want,” Ross said. “I can make it clear to him that you don’t — ”

“No,” Tessa said. “It’s not that. Look, Ross, I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“Why not? What’s the matter? Was it something I did?”

By then, even I was shaking my head. Begging and pleading were bad enough, but this was starting to sound pathetic.

Tessa mumbled something I couldn’t hear, and then turned away from Ross. Ross reached out and caught her arm. He must have grabbed it harder than he had intended. Either that or he startled her, because she let out a yelp.

“Let go!” she cried.

He released her as if she were a hunk of red-hot metal. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Tessa, I’m so sorry.”

That’s when they saw me. First her, then him. Her face turned red as she sped past me out of the newspaper office. His turned stormy.

“You ever heard of a little concept called privacy?” he snapped.

I guess I could have apologized. I could even have expressed a little sympathy at what had happened. I did neither. Instead, I decided to give him a piece of friendly advice.

“Forget about her, Ross,” is what I said. “She’s not your type.”

If the Herald were the Daily Planet and East Hastings were Metropolis, Ross Jenkins would have been Jimmy Olsen — sweet, naïve, eager and
slightly inept. An innocent, harmless sort of guy. Not a guy given to violence. But when I said what I said, a look came over Ross that surprised me. Surprised me and scared me a little. His eyes tightened, he started breathing so hard that his nostrils flared like miniature sails catching a stiff wind, and his face turned splotchy red.

“You don’t know anything about this,” he said. Said? Make that shouted. “This is none of your business. Stay out of my life.”

I stepped back automatically because, call me crazy, but for one split second I thought meek and mild Jimmy Olsen was going to take a swing at me. Instead he rushed by me and shoved the office door open so hard that it was a miracle it didn’t come off its hinges. It slammed shut again just as the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch.

* * *

The story that was going around the school by lunchtime the next day was this: Sid Talbot, who owned the local doughnut shop and who had apparently gone on a fitness craze last summer after having heart palpitations, was out jogging early that morning. I must have heard the story about two dozen times throughout the day. When kids told it, they just said, “The guy who owns the doughnut shop was out jogging.” When grown-ups told it, they always took a few detours before getting to the point — you know, that it was amazing how old Sid had stuck to his daily jogging routine considering that he had spent the last twenty years doing nothing more strenuous than wiping counters and ringing up coffees and crullers. Or that it was such a coincidence that he had taken the route he had, because if the weather had been cold and if it had snowed the way it usually did this time of year, he wouldn’t have been on the path that looped around the pond because you wouldn’t have been able to see any path, this time of year. Stuff like that.

The shortest distance between Sid Talbot setting off on his jog and what happened was this: Sid was doing a circuit of the lake that was half-inside East Hastings Provincial Park and half-outside it. He was pounding along — he had “hit his stride,” as he expressed it in a front-page article in the East Hastings Beacon — when he happened to glance at Elder Pond. And he thought to himself, in all the years I’ve lived here, I never thought I’d see water in the pond in March, instead of ice. That’s when he saw it. That’s what he said, it: “I wasn’t even sure what it was, but I got this feeling all the same that whatever it was, it wasn’t supposed to be floating in the pond like that.”

The it turned out to be Tessa Nixon. She was dead.