

Read on for a preview  
of the upcoming  
thriller

*The Hacker*

by

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## Chapter 1 March

He is a knight in shining armor, his head shrouded in a black helmet with a heavy faceshield. His arms are covered in heavy protective gear that project into the glass booth. He is ready, masterful, and undaunted. Or so he thinks. Any King and Queen would be honored to have this fierce soldier at the head of their army. *Fuck the King*, he says to himself. *I should be King. They do not appreciate my magnificence. They will see. And fuck the Queen, the biggest bitch in a realm of bitches.*

The room itself is dark, but the glass booth radiates an incredible incandescence. It is so bright that without protective eyewear it can obliterate the retina of the eye and blind a man, perhaps permanently, in less than a few seconds.

The initial flare up of the welder in the oxygen-free environment yields the most intense and pure white light. The Knight views it with deep religious reverence. As he begins welding, explosions of extraordinary color take place, dancing into the air as they fly off the tubular titanium joints being melded. It is a ballet of colors and shapes reminiscent of the aurora on the sun's surface. The images often change dramatically in tenor without warning. Unimaginable shapes of hate and evil suddenly dominate over the bright white light and colors. The images of hate appear dark against the blinding, white light. Sometimes the images are so intense that he has to stop welding, catch his breath, and allow the sweat to evaporate. Increasingly, he hears voices, words, and names accompanying these horrific images. Sometimes the words and names coalesce into a command, a mission from the highest source. At times, he looks to the source for guidance and receives no reply. He has to be patient.

The foreman enters unnoticed and approaches Mr. Vitrelli. There is no response to his voice. When he taps Mr. Vitrelli's shoulder the Knight stands from his stool with the speed of a cornered animal, extricates his arms from within the glass booth, and turns to meet his attacker. A large knife materializes from nowhere and the foreman fights for his life. During the scuffle, the flap of the welding helmet flips up and the ambient light from behind the open door catches Mr. Vitrelli in the face. He immediately becomes limp.

The foreman wriggles out from underneath the paralyzed Knight and runs to the parking lot, never to return. In later statements, the foreman will swear he heard Mr. Vitrelli utter the words "mother" and "cunt" repeatedly. Since no skin was pierced and Mr. Vitrelli has no record, no formal charges are ever lodged against him.

## Chapter 2

### June 8

The peaceful morning is interrupted as a tall middle-aged man runs up the long and gradual grade of Starlight Drive. His gray sweatshirt has deep water-rings on both the front and the back. Nearing the end of the five-mile run, he has found his stride. Although the headband does not help his thinning blonde hair to stay in place, it does keep the sweat from pouring down his face. About ten feet behind him, and quite winded, is his dog Luke, named after one of the Apostles. His tongue fans widely as it drapes far over the edge of his jowls and undulates with his panting.

As they proceed, an occasional neighbor picking up a newspaper gives a wave or thumbs-up sign. The suburban habitat is filled with all the charm of an old neighborhood, replete with the lush vegetation of grand old trees and no sidewalks. Beautiful Jacaranda line the street and their fallen flowers form a bed of purple matted to the road by the morning dew. The two lunge toward the driveway of a small two-story home in a final spurt of energy.

The beauty of Great Pass, Colorado stands in stark contrast to the metropolis of Denver that looms roughly twenty minutes away. Unlike suburban Great Pass, Denver has to deal with a rapidly growing population and the attendant problems of poverty, crime, tension, filth and decadence.

Crawford stops abruptly in his driveway and begins walking briskly in circles, hands on his hips, to keep his aging and exhausted muscles from cramping up. He pants, while Luke does the same lying on the cool grass like a pot-belly pig. As soon as Crawford catches his breath, he begins his post-exercise stretching. Standing, he twists in each direction to stretch the expansive muscles that line each side of the spinal vertebra. Taking a sitting position, he straightens his legs and bends forward to touch his toes in order to stretch his hamstrings. As he bends forward, his baggy sweatshirt pulls up his back and off his hips, revealing a holstered handgun. Luke starts barking, as he always will, when Crawford does this particular exercise.

His wife, Claire, comes out of the front door. Her bathrobe covers the short nightgown on her mildly pudgy body. Because her dark brown hair is unkempt from the night's sleep, her gray roots are more obvious. She carries a small silver plastic object in her hand.

"How'd you know I was back?" asks Crawford.

"Luke's barking is a dead giveaway. You got called about ten-fifteen minutes ago," she says coldly as she holds his cellphone out to him.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know. I didn't look," answers Claire, knowing very well who it was. "But I'm getting tired of this, you know?"

Crawford stands up quickly and takes the cellphone. Claire turns abruptly and goes back inside. He depresses one of the buttons and a phone number comes up.

"Oh, no. Not on a Saturday."

Luke follows Crawford into the house as he walks to the coat rack in the entrance hallway. He removes the pistol from his back holster and places it in the holster hiding under his jacket. Claire is within earshot in the kitchen.

"Where's Paul?" he asks.

"Either sleeping or studying, as usual. Where else?"

"Did he go out last night?"

"No. Why?"

Crawford turns and moves to the kitchen as he continues to talk: "After everything we've been through with him, don't you still get the feeling he's avoiding us?"

"No, but I often get the feeling he's avoiding *you*."

Crawford pauses for a moment looking at Claire and then turns to his cellphone and dials.

At that moment Paul walks into the kitchen. His hair is short and he is handsome despite the numerous piercings in his ears, one in his left eyebrow, another in his tongue. Not exactly what Crawford, or Claire, for that matter, had in mind. But he is gifted, doing very well in his first year of college. They hope that he is close to the end of the transition through the touchy phase. How and when and why their only child physically morphed is much more troublesome to Crawford than Claire. Paul assumes his father just isn't proud enough to bring him to his work anymore, where everyone is straight-laced like him. Even the undercover guys aren't allowed piercings. There is also the issue of the sole tuft of facial hair located just below his lower lip.

"Crawford here. What? Yes I do. What's the address?"

Crawford snaps his fingers and Claire reluctantly fetches a pad and pencil for Crawford. He writes down the number and ends the phone call.

"Ruff, ruff," mocks Paul. "She's not a dog."

"What street?" asks Claire looking at the pad, trying to ignore Paul and hoping Crawford will do the same.

"Monroe."

"My God, that's not too far from here."

"Is it your impression, over the years, that I treat your mother like a dog?"

"Whatever."

"I gotta go." Crawford grabs his things and heads out. "Hope this doesn't take too long."

## Chapter 3

Nothing bad ever happens in Great Pass, ever. This explains the gathering mass of gawkers in front of 537 1/2 Monroe in the early afternoon of June 8th. There are marked and unmarked police cars from Denver as well as the familiar local Sheriff's car. The entire lot is roped off with a neon yellow plastic tape from the curb to the two adjoining properties. Although no one has a clue about what has happened, they all know something bad has finally befallen their cherished Great Pass. A few whispers are heard in the crowd: "It must be that strange girl." "I told you she was bad news." "Poor child." The predominant sound, however, is that of silent concern. The children are kept indoors.

Under normal circumstances, the scene of grown men in suits groping about a front lawn with surgical gloves would have been a funny sight. Not today, not even for the kids who were lucky enough to catch a glimpse.

"The big boys from Denver sure know what they are doing," someone murmurs as they watch as the lawn is meticulously dissected for evidence.

While the boys do their combing, the flash of cameras from within 537 1/2 Monroe is seen behind the drawn curtains. Inside is a macabre scene. Death looms with its slight putrid scent despite open windows and the backdoor.

"Don't move her, dammit, until all photos are taken, and I am there right beside the DB," yells the chief of Denver Homicide, Detective Crawford. Per usual, he had arrived on the scene within thirty minutes of the call for damage control and most of the morning had already passed quickly. . . .

