

## Chapter One

**Saturday, June 10 - 3:27 A.M.**

Harrison Bartlett bolted upright at the sound of the doorbell. His head swiveled toward the nightstand and then he squinted at glowing digits on the alarm clock. *This isn't good. Something's wrong.* Unable to see in the pitch black bedroom, he froze, straining to hear over his thundering heartbeat. Nothing.

"Barb, wake up," he called, shaking his wife.

The doorbell sounded again, this time three chimes in rapid succession. He threw the covers off and rolled out of bed.

Fumbling for his glasses, he yelled, "Barbara, someone's at the door. Wake up."

Because she hadn't moved, he assumed his shout was a distant whisper in his wife's *Ambien*-laden brain, so he leaned across the bed

and gave her another firm shake and then moved toward the bedroom door.

Three more rapid-fire doorbell chimes and he called out, "Coming. I'm coming."

*Harry's in trouble.* His pulse quickened as he descended the staircase, the words of his father's lecture on his fifteenth birthday replaying in his mind, "Son, nothing good ever happens after midnight." He remembered passing those same words on to Harry just a couple of months before when his son had turned fifteen.

The pounding from the other side of the heavy door reverberated off the marble floor and high ceilings of the foyer. "It's the police Mr. Bartlett. Please open up."

Harrison grabbed the wooden ball at the bottom of the banister with a sweaty hand and leaped off the fourth stair, landing hard on the slippery stone floor, nearly crashing into a heap. Heart racing, he peered out through the peephole and spied two county sheriff deputies waiting on the stoop. He flipped on the porch lights and then cracked the door.

"Is this the Harrison Bartlett residence?" asked the older deputy.

"Yes," Harrison answered. "What's going on?"

"We need to talk to you. May we come in?"

Harrison held the door for the officers while motioning them past the foyer and into the living room.

"Harrison, what's going on?" slurred his wife from the landing at the top of the stairs as she struggled with her robe.

Before he could answer, the older deputy removed his hat.

"Pardon the intrusion, Mrs. Bartlett, I know its late . . . could you please come downstairs, we need to talk."

Mrs. Bartlett nodded and clung to the banister as she wobbled down the staircase and then joined the group in the living room.

"Do you know where your son is tonight?" asked the older deputy, his gaze fixed on Harrison.

"Sure," Harrison answered. "He spent the night with a couple of buddies."

He looked at his wife who managed a lethargic nod. "Harry's staying with his friend Tim," she mumbled. "At the Hendersons . . ." Then, as if reality had begun to break its way through the narcotic haze, her eyebrows narrowed. "What is going on here?" she demanded. "What's happened to Harry?"

"Yes, what's going on? Is Harry okay?" asked Harrison.

The younger officer's gaze never left the spot he picked on the coffee table while the older deputy stared straight into Harrison's eyes. "I'm very sorry to have to tell you this Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett . . . your son is dead."

## Chapter Two

**Sunday, June 11 - 2:14 P.M.**

The ringing cell phone invaded Professor Steven Archer's vivid dream. It took a full second for him to comprehend that the blaring ring tone wasn't actually his favorite band playing live on the back deck of his beach house. He smiled as the opening bars of "Tom Sawyer" filled his ears. *A modern day warrior . . .*

He tried to remember the dream but it vanished, leaving him with nothing but an intense yearning to fall back into a deep sleep and finish the adventure. Frowning, he left the beach towel draped over his head while he groped for his phone.

"Hello," Steven managed, still not fully awake.

"Hi, honey. Are you okay? You sound sick."

"Hi, Mom. I'm fine. Just taking a nap." Steven sat up and pulled

the towel off his head. The blazing sunlight exploded on his exposed face and he clamped his eyes shut, a bright orange afterimage flooding his brain. "How are you?"

"Steven, sorry to wake you, but something's happened—"

"Is it Gramps?" interrupted Steven as an uncomfortable tingle rippled through him.

"Gramps is fine," she answered.

"Thank goodness." Steven exhaled. Gramps would celebrate his ninety-first birthday in a couple of months and, despite his remarkable health, Steven knew eventually one of these calls would have a different, sad ending.

"Do you remember the Shifely family? They had a daughter Barbie. She was about your age."

"Barbie Shifely." Steven stroked his chin. "That name sounds familiar."

"The Shifely's went to our church. You may have gone to Sunday school with Barbie. She's Barbara Bartlett now and her family lives down in Florida, near you." She paused. "Anyway, I have terrible news."

"What is it Mom?" Steven asked as his pulse quickened.

"Barbie's son, Harry, was . . ." Her voiced cracked as she finished, "murdered."

"My God, that's terrible." Steven swallowed. "What happened?"

"I don't really know any details. Barb's mother is devastated,

of course. Have you read anything about it in the paper or seen anything on the news down there?"

"Now that you mention it, I did see something yesterday on the news about the police finding a dead teenager up in the city. But honestly, I didn't really pay much attention. Now that school is out, I've been taking it easy down here at the beach."

"That's got to be him, Harry Bartlett. He was Barbie's fifteen-year-old son . . . so sad." She paused. "Steven, I need a favor from you." Despite the sweltering heat, goose bumps broke out on Steven's arms. *God, no. Please don't go there, Mom. Anything but*--and then she said the dreaded "f" word. "I know how much you hate funerals . . . "

Steven fought to suppress the childhood memory, but failed as the stream of images and feelings came rushing back. Bouncing blonde pigtails, cute green eyes, and a mischievous smile, she had been his first crush. He remembered sprinting across the playground, she was always his target when they played tag at recess, and then the butterflies that filled his stomach when smiling, she raced after him to tag him back. He worked so hard to get her to pay attention to him, to like him, and then the accident stole her away.

His mother's voice brought him back, "Is there any way you could go, you know, on behalf of the family? You know if I didn't have to stay here and take care of Gramps I would fly down, but--"

"Mom, I uh . . . " Steven tried to continue, but no words came out. He couldn't stop the flood of memories filling his mind. As if

yesterday, he recalled sitting at the kitchen table while his parents told him it would be best if he didn't attend Tami Reed's funeral. He cried and screamed at them, it wasn't fair—he needed a chance to tell her goodbye, in person. He sobbed until they finally relented and took him along to the funeral.

Seated at the rear of the chapel, his parents refused to allow him to see Tami up close. But, somehow, he managed to slip out of the pew and rush to the casket. With tears streaming down his face he stood on tiptoes to bid farewell to his beloved classmate. Unprepared for the waxy, lifeless face that lay before him, her deathly pallor unsuccessfully covered by powder, rouge, and lipstick, his eyesight grew fuzzy and filled with dozens of flashbulbs bursting with white light. His vision slowly narrowed to just a pinhole of light while the roar of a giant wave crashing on the beach filled his ears and then he crumpled, falling to the chapel floor.

He remembered waking up in the back seat of the car, his mother holding his head in her lap, gently calling his name. The grotesque image of little Tami's distorted face was now permanently etched in his mind, a vision that would haunt him for years . . . and then, nearly twenty years later, heartbreak would strike again.

"Steven . . . Steven, are you there, honey?" the sound of his mother calling out snapped him back to the present.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm here."

"Listen," she said, her voice stern. "I understand that you have

awful, painful memories and funerals aren't your thing."

Steven shook his head—she could not and did not understand. After his terrible experience as a first grader he had refused to look at a funeral home much less set foot in one. Then, twenty years later, tragedy forced him to attend only the second funeral of his life.

"I don't ask you for much," his mother continued, "but I *am* asking you for this favor. Please go to this funeral for me."

"Dammit Mom!" Steven exploded. "Exactly how could you possibly understand my pain? You never had to bury the love of your life just days after your honeymoon. I've spent the last twenty years trying to put Cindy's death and funeral behind me. I haven't been to a funeral since she passed away for a reason."

"Steven, I am so sorry . . ." she said, her voice weak and wounded. "I just thought—"

"I gotta go," Steven interrupted, and hung up. He slammed his fist against the deck as a flash of heat exploded inside his head and rifled through his body, leaving his arms and legs tingling.

How dare she request that he attend a funeral knowing how he had suffered, first as a child, and then after losing Cindy. His mind started to flash back to the days just after he and Cindy had returned from their honeymoon and the tragic accident that had ripped her from this earth and his life forever. His vision blurred as he tried to suppress the flood of tears and the awful memories—memories

of burying his beautiful bride so many years ago.

### Chapter Three

**Sunday, June 11 - 4:38 P.M.**

Bobbi Cline slung her backpack onto the desk and then slumped into the nearby chair. Brushing back the damp strands of long black hair clinging to her temples and neck, she frowned and crinkled her nose, feeling as if New York City grime had permeated her sweaty clothes. She grabbed the nearest legal pad, leaned back in the office chair and vigorously fanned herself. Eyes closed, she smiled as puffs of cool air hit her moist face. *God, that feels good.*

Even on a Sunday afternoon, probably the least busy time for the paper, the newsroom hum—clacking keyboards, muffled phone conversations, and the constant drone of news channel anchors emanating from countless TV monitors—filled Bobbi's head. She loved it—this is where she belonged. She grinned, still not believing that

she had already managed to make the big time, her dream job, news reporter for *The New York Times* in "the Big Apple."

Bobbi scanned her email inbox and found nothing urgent. Then she opened her *Google Reader* to check the latest news. She quickly paged through the links of the various articles that had been added and updated since yesterday. The number of RSS feeds and the amount of information she had subscribed to sometimes seemed overwhelming, but gathering and analyzing data was a critical tool in her business.

She yawned while scrolling through the seemingly endless list of links. *The world appears somewhat quiet.* Then she spotted a story from Florida, where she had attended college. The story link read, "Teen's Body Found, Foul Play Suspected."

Bobbi clicked on the link taking her to the local newspaper's story, which had run earlier that day in the Sunday morning edition. The article provided few details other than the body of a male, age fifteen, had been found early Saturday morning. An unnamed detective was quoted as saying the department was "treating the case as a homicide."

A smile spread across Bobbi's face. *I'll bet that's my buddy, Detective Diaz!*

But Bobbi knew that Detective Diaz was more than just a buddy, he had saved her life. A shiver snaked down her spine as the painful memories of her ordeal in college flooded back. Another student had stalked her and then accosted her. The psychopath had intended to

hurt and then kill her, but Detective Diaz had managed to intervene before the monster had badly harmed her.

Tears welled in Bobbi's eyes as she recalled the pain caused by the wire ties cutting into her wrists and ankles. She remembered the horrifying sensation of blood from the wounds on her wrists trickling down her arms and dripping off her elbows. She nearly wretched as she relived the pitch-black darkness caused by the blindfold, and the terror and nausea that resulted from being tightly gagged with a bandana, unable to speak and barely able to breathe.

*Stop! Get a grip. That was five years ago.*

She shook her head and inhaled, paused, and then slowly emptied her lungs. She sucked in another deep breath and then exhaled, willing herself to calm down. She clenched her jaw and, as if packing up an old boyfriend's stuff after a break up, gathered up all the terrifying memories, forced them back into a subconscious box, sealed it tight, and pushed it out of her mind.

After regaining control of her emotions, Bobbi reread the story about the kid in Florida. Natural curiosity, one of the traits that made her a successful reporter, now took over and she wanted to find out if Detective Diaz had been quoted in the story and assigned to the case.

Bobbi unzipped her backpack and pulled out her notes. Flipping through the pages, she scanned the data. She paused to think, and then her eyebrows shot up as her reporter's intuition kicked in. *I've*

got a hunch . . . Although she possessed no evidence whatsoever to prove it, she wondered if the murder in Florida might in some way be connected to the local, unsolved murder story she was currently investigating. She read the story on the Florida murder a third time and frowned. Despite finding nothing obvious that might link the two cases, she could not shake the sense that they were somehow connected.

She opened her desk drawer and rummaged around until she located a small box of business cards. Her fingers flipped through the makeshift *Rolodex* until she found it. *Bingo!* She chuckled, remembering the detective's favorite saying. Snagging the phone, she dialed the number and, when prompted, punched in Detective Diaz's extension.

Four rings, no answer. After his voice mail greeting played and the beep sounded, Bobbi left the following message, "Hi Detective Diaz . . . uh, sorry . . . Frank." Even though he insisted, she still had trouble using his first name. "Its Bobbi calling all the way from New York City. I know its been awhile, and I hope you are well. Hey, I saw an article in the paper down there about a kid that was killed Saturday. The story said it might be homicide. I'm curious . . . are you working the case? I would love to catch up, please give me a call when you get a chance."

## Chapter Four

**Tuesday, June 13 - 3:39 P.M.**

Steven eased his black *Porsche* into one of the few remaining spots at the back of the funeral home lot. Tossing and turning the night after the argument, he had called his mother back, apologized and agreed to attend the funeral. "What was I thinking?" he mumbled, shifting the car into park with a sweaty hand. He adjusted the driver's side air conditioning vents to point directly at his face—he could not get enough of the ice-cold air. Removing his sunglasses, he rubbed his eyes. *You didn't even know the kid, you can get through this.*

A wave of panic hit had him back at the beach house as he finished dressing, but he fought off the urge to ditch the black suit and skip the funeral. Distracted by the broadcast of a rare afternoon

baseball game on the radio, he somehow remained calm during the forty-minute drive from the beach to the suburbs.

Now, with the funeral home just across the parking lot, his pulse began to race again and, despite the frigid air blowing on his face, droplets of sweat formed on his forehead. It had taken years for him to heal after losing his bride, and his method of coping had always been to stay away from those things that reminded him of her passing, especially funerals.

Memories of Cindy, moments he cherished but that he had also banished to avoid the pain, flooded his mind. He relived their courtship in two-second bursts . . . when they met, their first date, the passionate kisses and love making. A tear slipped down his face. *No! Stop doing this*, he pleaded with himself. But the memory barrage continued . . . her dazzling smile as he proposed, the wedding ceremony with family and friends watching their vows, dancing at the reception, and then the honeymoon.

Steven shook his head, grabbed the gearshift, and then slammed the car into reverse. *I just can't do this*. As he revved the engine and prepared to back out of the spot, he glanced at his face in the rear view mirror, and remembered the words of his mother's request, "*Is there anyway you could attend this one on behalf of the family?*"

Over the years there had been many family funerals and not once had he been expected to attend. His mother had always represented him, protecting him from the pain of Cindy's death and his inability

to set foot in a funeral home. Now, she needed him to step up.

Steven slipped the car back into park. He flipped down the sun visor and studied his face in the vanity mirror. *What a mess.* With the back of his hand he brushed the tears from his cheeks and then straightened his tie. *This will all be over in an hour or so.*

Steven cut the engine and slid out of the car. Broiling sunshine engulfed him as he pulled on his dark suit coat and donned black *Wayfarers*. Within seconds his starched, white dress shirt fell limp and damp, victim of the one-two punch of heat and humidity.

He started across the shimmering, black asphalt toward the famous, two-story Victorian mansion. He had read in a newspaper article that the original house had been built by the town's founder and namesake a century-and-a-half before, a place to raise his family of eight children and entertain guests. Fifty years later, after falling on hard times, the family sold the homestead to an ambitious mortician who restored the property and converted it into a funeral home.

A distant rumble signaled formation of afternoon thunderstorms that would no-doubt sweep through the area, quickly dumping rain and providing brief reprieve from the heat. Steven shaded his eyes and looked west, past the mansion, at the darkening sky. Towering thunderheads had turned angry and spit intermittent flashes of lightning.

He paused at the entrance and exhaled, a final attempt to steel

his nerves before stepping into the one place on earth he dreaded more than any other. A refreshing blast of cold air greeted him as he pulled open the funeral home's immense front door. A thin, young man wearing genuine an expression of compassion and a perfectly tailored charcoal-gray suit offered Steven a nod. After handing him a program, he motioned toward a guest book situated at the far end of the anteroom. Steven signed the book, and then peered into the parlor beyond—mourners packed the large room, grouped in clusters, chatting with each other at low volume.

"Where are the parents?" Steven quietly asked the young funeral director.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett are seated over there, along the far wall," the thin man whispered, tilting his head slightly to the right—his gaze landed on a large group of people gathered around a middle-aged couple and a boy squeezed together on an antique, maroon love seat.

"Thanks," Steven murmured. He tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry.

His mind raced, searching for the right words as he stepped toward the grieving family. His pulse shot up and he attempted to discreetly dry his palms, slick with perspiration, on the sides of his suit coat. The room, which moments before had provided a cool sanctuary from the parking lot's oppressive heat and humidity, now felt like an oven. He clawed at his damp shirt collar, fighting hard

against the mounting panic.

After Steven had traipsed through the group, he waited for his turn to speak with the grieving couple. Barbie and her husband looked like typical, middle-aged parents, but they both wore dazed expressions—a mixture of sadness, shock, and disbelief.

Barbie's red and puffy eyes had a glassy appearance that suggested she probably had taken something to help calm her nerves. Most of her makeup had been wiped away, probably resulting from countless bouts of crying, leaving her face raw and exposed. Her husband appeared robotic. He barely spoke, shaking hands and smiling when needed, then falling back into a trance-like state.

Wedged in next to Mr. Bartlett, sat a handsome boy, concentrating on the screen of a small game device that he held up to his face with one hand. Steven thought he looked to be about ten. In his other hand, he held a rubber band in his lap that he constantly rolled between his thumb and his index and middle fingers. The ends of rubber band danced in perpetual motion, twisting back and forth.

The boy's face portrayed a strange expression, his mouth slightly open, jaw slowly undulating from side to side. With eyebrows arched, his unblinking gaze never left the screen he held just inches from the tip of his nose. He would exhibit this odd behavior for about twenty to thirty seconds then stop, a huge grin spreading across his face. With his focus never leaving the tiny screen, he would fiddle with the device for a few seconds and then begin the

ritual again.

He seemed oblivious to everything and everyone around him except when his mother would grab his attention to introduce him to one of the people paying their respects or, every so often, when his father would, without looking, absently reach over and grasp his hand to quiet the twitching rubber band.

Steven's turn arrived to speak with the family. He breathed deeply. *You can do this . . . they've just lost their son.*

He forced the air from his lungs, and attempted to look calm and compassionate as he stepped forward. Nodding to Barbie, he tried to remember her from his childhood, but she didn't look familiar. He looked in Barbie's eyes and thrust out his hand.

"Hi Barbie, I'm Steven Archer." Barbie's eyebrows arched slightly and she opened her mouth, but did not speak. He continued, "I am Judy Archer's son. Our parents are friends and we went to the same church . . . in Ohio, as kids . . ." Barbie smiled and nodded, but he could tell that she still couldn't place him. He cleared his throat and continued, "I . . . we, that is . . . my whole family . . . we are so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," she replied, and then turned to her husband. "This is Harrison."

Steven shook his outstretched hand and offered him a nod. Harrison nodded back but did not speak—his body going through the motions, but his mind appeared a million miles away.

"My condolences," Steven mumbled.

"This is my youngest, Davis," Barbie said, motioning past her husband to the boy. Steven stepped toward him and then took a knee.

"Hi, I'm Steven," he said, offering his hand. The boy lowered the game device to his lap and, his gaze never leaving the screen, shook Steven's hand.

"Harry died," Davis said, his steady voice showing no emotion. Steven swallowed, not knowing how to react to this blunt statement. Then the boy's head lifted and he shot a glance into Steven's face. "Harry had three tanks and four healers." The boy broke eye contact with Steven and immediately resumed staring at the game device.

Steven opened his mouth to answer, but didn't know what to say, so he cleared his throat and acknowledged the boy with a slow nod. Barbie broke the awkward silence, "Thank you so much for coming, it means a lot . . . and please, thank your mother for us as well."

"I will," Steven promised as he stood. He shook both parents' hands again before stepping away, sad for the grieving family, but relieved the encounter had ended.

## Chapter Five

**Tuesday, June 13 - 6:11 P.M.**

Booming thunder shook the funeral home, rattling the mansion's windows and causing the pastor to pause so he could be heard over the deafening explosions. Steven pursed his lips, recalling the brief, but violent thunderstorm that hit during the funeral service. *Not unlike young Harry Bartlett's life and premature death.* As the preacher pronounced the final words of the of the benediction, the storm ended.

Honoring his promise to his mother, Steven sat in the back of the chapel for the funeral and then joined the procession of cars to the cemetery for the brief grave-side service.

Steven watched as the large group of mourners began breaking away from the grave site—some in a hurry to leave while others

lingered as graveyard workers began lowering the teenager's coffin into the ground. He took his time walking back to his car. With the storm long gone, the sun blazed down again turning the cemetery into a giant sauna. Miniature clouds of steam rose from the asphalt lanes that wove through the sea of headstones.

Steven peeled off his damp suit jacket and slung it over his shoulder. He sighed, glad the whole thing finally ended—he survived. Funerals were supposed to provide closure for the survivors, but he knew from experience that the healing process for the Bartlett family had only just begun. He assumed their pain had to be compounded because of the violent manner in which the young man had apparently died.

"What the hell are you doing here?" a voice called out. Steven snapped back to reality and noticed a man leaning against his car, puffing a cigarette.

"Hey, get the hell off my car, buddy, or I'll call the law," Steven shot back.

Glaring at Steven, the man took a final drag then flicked the stub of the cigarette into the wet grass. He pulled his suit coat back revealing a gold shield clipped to his belt and the butt of a Glock peeking out from his shoulder holster and said, "I am the law, and don't you ever forget it."

"Oh yeah?" Steve said, now just a couple of strides from the detective and moving fast. He thrust his arm forward and flipped him

the bird.

As the men came together, they smiled.

"Steven Archer, how are you, my friend?" the detective asked, grabbing his outstretched hand.

"Hi Frank," Steven replied, pumping Detective Frank Diaz's hand. "I'm okay I guess, given the circumstances," Steven said, shrugging while panning the cemetery.

The detective popped a breath mint into his mouth. "I didn't know that you knew the Bartlett family," he said, his head tilted and one eyebrow inched up on his tanned forehead. "What a shame."

"Actually, I don't know them personally," Steven said, and then explained about his mother asking him to attend the funeral. "So, I'm guessing this is your case?"

"Yeah." Frank answered, shaking his head. "This is a tough one. The kid was only fifteen."

Steven winced. "Any arrests yet?"

"Not yet. We're following a bunch of leads, but the case is strange. Kid from the suburbs, great family, good grades, not a trouble-maker, no enemies. Doesn't add up."

"Random? Poor kid in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

Looking past Steven at the graveyard beyond, Frank spat out the mint and grabbed his cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "Maybe," he answered, tapping a smoke from the pack, then lighting up. The vacant expression on his friend's face told Steven the detective had

momentarily left the conversation while his brain furiously analyzed some aspect of the case. Frank discharged a bluish stream of smoke from his nose and continued. "But my gut tells me this wasn't a random act or a robbery gone bad . . . there's more to this, just not sure what yet."

"How's the family holding up?" Steven asked. "The parents seem like they're still in shock."

"Oh yeah, they're a mess. Mom's high on 'scripts and Dad's nearly comatose, lost in his own misery. They are trying to help, but . . ." He frowned and shook his head.

"I met the little brother at the funeral. He seemed a little . . . I don't know, odd? Is he just coping or—"

"He's an Aspie," Frank interrupted. "He's been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome."

"Okay, I've heard of that," Steven said, nodding his head. "Isn't that a form of autism?"

"Yes," Frank answered. "According to his parents, the boy is considered a high-functioning autistic. He's very intelligent, but lacks most basic social skills. The way his parents described it, his interface, you know, his interactions with other people are . . . well, different."

"Interesting . . . sort of makes sense," Steven said. "When I met him, he just blurted out, 'Harry died.' No emotion at all. He didn't even look me in the eye. Then he said the strangest thing . . ."

. something about Harry having 'tanks' and 'healers.' I didn't understand what he meant."

"Yep," Frank said, nodding. "I had the same experience when I talked with him. He was very matter-of-fact about his brother's death . . . as you said, almost emotionless. I could tell, you know, deep inside, he was sad and that he would miss Harry. But it seemed like he didn't know how to express that sadness." Frank sucked on the cigarette and then a wide grin formed across his face. "Hey, a mutual friend of ours called me the other day from New York City."

Steven's face lit up. "That's gotta be Bobbi."

"Bingo," Frank replied with a wink.

"How's our young ace reporter doing?" Steven asked.

"I haven't talked to her yet. Sounded good on the message she left. She said something about an article she read on the Bartlett boy. Wanted to know if I'm working the case. I just haven't had a chance to get back to her."

"When you talk to her, tell her 'hello' for me" Steven said, grinning.

"Will do," Frank said as they shook hands. "And once I crack this case, let's get together, and I'll let you buy me a beer."

## Chapter Six

**Tuesday, June 13 - 7:43 P.M.**

Bobbi Cline sat in a back booth of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street *McDonalds*, sipping an iced caramel mocha while her laptop guzzled the restaurant's free Wifi bandwidth. She had just put the finishing touches on her copy and now watched the progress bar on her screen. The electronic bits that made up her story spooled out of her computer, streamed through the Internet, and magically wound up in her editor's electronic inbox back at the newsroom a couple of blocks away.

She shook her head and frowned as the transmission completed. The story she filed had been well written and included the latest facts on the unsolved murder she'd been tracking, but her frustration stemmed not from her writing, but more the lack of progress on the

case.

Even at twenty-five and the youngest reporter on the news desk, she had enough experience to know that the readers wanted the crime solved, the bad guy in jail . . . closure. The excitement of the initial story had worn off and her update articles had become smaller and lacked punch. She needed a break in the case.

With her story now filed, Bobbi packed up her laptop and prepared to head home when her cell phone rang. The caller id indicated a Florida number and she smiled.

"Hello, this is Bobbi Cline," she said.

"Hi Bobbi, it's Frank Diaz. I got your message and . . . well, sorry it's taken a couple of days to call you back. Been slammed on a case down here. How are you?"

"I'm great, you know, living the dream up here in the big city," she answered.

"Hey before I forget, I ran into Steven Archer today and he asked me to tell you 'hello.'"

Bobbi exhaled as a warm tingle flashed through her core. Even though she graduated several years before, she still had a crush on the professor. *God he's cute*, she thought, remembering his sparkling blue eyes, tanned face and dazzling smile. She licked her lips, *and that body!* She swallowed and then cleared her throat. "How is Professor Archer?"

"Still rich, still handsome, still perfect," he answered with a

chuckle. "When I grow up I want to be just like him."

Bobbi laughed. He did seem to lead a charmed life, but she knew Professor Archer's success had little to do with luck. Having written an article on him back in college, she knew him to be one of the world's top Internet security experts. He created a very successful company that he subsequently sold, just at the peak of the dot-com boom. In his mid-thirties he had retired from business, filthy rich. He built an enormous beach house, traveled the world, but soon grew bored with retirement and started teaching computer programming at the university.

She allowed another image of the professor into her mind, Archer tossing a Frisbee on the beach, nothing but board shorts on his toned body. *Yeah, I still have a thing for him*, she admitted. *It would be a miracle if he was still single.* She frowned, *I need to go on a date!*

Bobbi knew their conversation would be interrupted soon—it always happened with Detective Diaz, so she shifted gears. "Hey, I read about that fifteen-year-old down there. Is that your case?"

"Sure is. How did you figure that out? Far as I know my name hasn't been used by the press . . . yet."

"Just a hunch. When I saw the quote in the story I had a feeling it was from you."

Detective Diaz laughed. "That obvious, eh? So what's your angle here, kid? You know the family or something?"

Bobbi hesitated, tapping a pen on the notepad she had pulled

from her backpack. *Gosh, he's gonna think I'm a nutcase. Oh what the heck, I've got nothing to lose.* "No, its just that . . . well, when I read the story on Sunday, I got another hunch that your case might be connected to the one I'm following up here."

"Connected?" Detective Diaz asked. "Connected in what way?"

"Well, at the time I really didn't have any facts, but since I called you on Sunday, more details on both cases have surfaced and there are some similarities."

"Such as?" Detective Diaz asked. His question had a sharp edge and his tone had switched from social to business.

"Your vic, at least from what I read, was a good kid, from a good family, and not a trouble-maker, right?"

"Bingo," Detective Diaz replied.

"Well that's kind of similar to the dead guy up here. He was a professional, making good money, with no prior history of trouble with the law—"

"So neither vic had a rap sheet, what does that prove?"

Detective Diaz interrupted, his question laced with frustration.

Bobbi winced. *Easy now, she warned herself. Don't piss him off.*

"This kid was only fifteen," he continued. "How old was your guy?"

"He was thirty-nine," she answered.

"See?" he shot back. "Look Bobbi, I appreciate your intuition, I really do. Lord knows you have been dead on, no pun intended, in the past, but I'm struggling to see any tangible connection here. The kid

down here was in high school. Your guy was old enough to be his father. The crimes occurred twelve-hundred miles apart. I think you're off base on this one."

Bobbi frowned. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"Listen," Detective Diaz said, the edge in his voice now gone. "We're trying to get a handle on this situation. His parents are still a mess, but as the hours go by, and the shock wears off, they are beginning to provide more helpful details on this kid. I'm not convinced we know everything he was into."

"What do mean? You think maybe he wasn't the goody two shoes his parents thought he was?" Bobbi asked.

"Exactly. There are little things I've started to pick up on."

"Like what?" she asked. She smiled and nodded, *Now we're getting somewhere.*

"Like his grades had recently started dropping and he had become withdrawn from the family, you know, different friends, locking himself in his room and staying up all night. That kind of stuff."

Bobbi's eyebrows shot up. "Drugs?"

"Maybe. We're looking into it. His parents deny any drug use, but they also admit they trusted him and had become pretty lenient, you know, letting him come and go as he pleased. Look, they had their hands full with the father working all the time trying to support their high-end lifestyle in this shitty economy and the mother coping with their younger son . . . he's, uh, a special needs kid. Plus,

every time I've talked with the mother she has been zoned out on some kind of prescription drug, antidepressants I'm guessing."

"Wow. I see where you're going," Bobbi replied. "Sounds like maybe the kid had recently started down a different path and the parents just didn't recognize it."

"Bingo. In fact, we found a fresh tattoo on the kid's body that the parents never knew about."

Bobbi's mouth fell open and the pen dropped from her hand. "Wait, what? A fresh tattoo?" she asked. Then it happened—she heard the dreaded beep on the line and a pause.

"Hold on," the detective said and then a couple of beats later continued, "Bobbi, I've got another call I have to take. We'll talk later."

"Wait, Detective Diaz." Too late, the line went dead.

"Dammit," she muttered and slammed her fist on the table. *Why does he always do this to me?*

Bobbi rubbed her hand and sipped her drink. Then a huge smile formed on her face. She may have just caught a break. It was a long shot, but the victim in her case had also recently got a tattoo. *What if, somehow, these tattoos are related?* That would certainly link the two cases. As she packed up her notebook, her mind raced. She needed to find out more about the Florida kid's tattoo, like size, location on the body, and description.