

# CHAPTER 1

It felt satisfying to leave a funeral with dry eyes.

I wasn't mourning a young life taken too soon. I wasn't mourning tragic loss to senseless violence.

He died old. In his sleep. In his own bed. Just the way we'd all like to go.

For the last decade, he'd been a reliable source of scoops around city hall, so I'd paid my respects. I didn't stay for the ham-sandwich-and-potato-salad lunch in the church basement; I needed to get back to the station before my boss realized I was gone.

As I reached the parking lot, I heard my name. I'm Riley Spartz, an investigative reporter for Channel 3 in Minneapolis. People recognize me frequently. Sometimes that's good. But not this time.

I turned and saw a short man with perfect hair and stylish clothes, waving at me from behind the hearse.

"We have nothing to talk about," I said, continuing to walk—but faster—to my car.

"How can you be so sure?" He ran to catch up to me, his cologne getting stronger as he got closer.

As a policy I didn't speak to Sam Pierce, the local newspa-

per gossip writer, but I shouldn't have been surprised to see him lurking outside the church. He liked sneaking into funerals and later listing in his column who cried and who didn't. Who wore black and who didn't.

"Let's talk about what's going on in your newsroom," he said. "I hear that new reporter from Texas started today."

Sam liked to hit fresh TV blood with some cruel observation in print soon after they arrived. Maybe something mortifying they did at their old company Christmas party—like sitting on a supervisor's lap. Maybe something embarrassing that happened the first day on their new job—like mispronouncing a local suburb, perhaps Edina—during a live shot. Sam adored branding newcomers as outsiders.

"I heard some interesting things about his marriage," he continued.

I ignored him. Sam Pierce was a verbal terrorist.

A lot of what he wrote simply wasn't true. When pressed, he'd admit it, justifying publication with the explanation that, unlike me, he was *not* a reporter and didn't *have* to prove anything was true. He just had to prove people were gossiping about it.

Often he purposely refrained from calling the subject for confirmation or reaction. Otherwise, he might officially learn the morsel was false and have to kill the item. That would create more work, hunting down last-minute trash to fill his gossip column, "Piercing Eyes."

Sam's newspaper photo was cropped tight around a pair of intense eyes. The design achieved a striking graphic look for his column, plus it gave him the anonymity that allowed him to show up in places he'd normally have been unwelcome if recognized.

Sam had adopted a media technique used by the newspaper food critic to help keep her face incognito while dining. He appeared as a frequent radio talk show guest but avoided television interviews like birds avoid cats.

Because I was part of the local press corps, I could pick Sam Pierce out of a crowd but was always surprised how few public figures recognized him. Until it was too late.

“It might be in your best interest to cooperate,” Sam hinted to me. “Think of it as buying goodwill to keep your *own* transgressions out of the newspaper.”

“You got nothing on me.” I climbed into my car.

“Don’t be too sure. I have my sources.”

“Not only do you have nothing on me,” I said, “you have no sources.”

Then I slammed my car door, drove away, and hoped it was true.





ATRIA BOOKS

## CHAPTER 2

**T**he new reporter Sam was planning to blindside was staring at a giant map of the Twin Cities hanging over the newsroom assignment desk. Tomorrow, he'd be thrown on the street to bring back a story. But today, he was getting to know the anchors, producers, and other behind-the-scenes players at Channel 3.

He'd apparently offered to listen to the police scanner and that pleased the bosses, because for most of us, the constant cop chatter was just more newsroom white noise.

Clay Burrell had been working at a TV station in Corpus Christi along the Gulf of Mexico when our news director, Noreen Banks, saw something special in his résumé tape and brought him north. A nice career move for him. Market size 129 to market size 15. I figured Noreen got him cheap.

He walked like a man who's good looking and knows it, not unusual in television newsrooms. More unusual was his footwear, cowboy boots of an exotic gray and white reptile skin.

"Glad to be working together, Clay," I said, trying to live up to our Minnesota Nice reputation. "I just want to give you a little heads-up . . ." I started to warn him about the gossip writer when he suddenly went, "Hush, little lady."

"There it goes again," he said. "Most definitely 10-89. Homi-

cide.” He pointed to the 10-codes taped on the wall next to the scanner box.

And because his ears heard news gold in a homicide call, within minutes he was on his way to get crime scene video with a station photographer and was soon leading the evening newscast with the EXCLUSIVE story of a decapitated woman—her nude body dumped in Theodore Wirth Park, about ten minutes from the station.

Wirth Park has a bird sanctuary, a wildflower garden, and a woodsy lake and creek framed by lush fall colors this time of year. But it also has a reputation for danger that’s stuck with it for the last decade or so after two prostitutes were found murdered there. In all fairness, their bodies were dumped. So they could have been killed anywhere, even the suburbs. And frankly, unless you count unleashed dogs and occasional complaints about sodomy in the bushes, the crime there isn’t any worse than in any other Minneapolis park.

Yet, when the news hit that another dead body had been found in Wirth, all across town, folks nodded knowingly.

Minneapolis Park Police had been waiting for this day to come and had installed a surveillance camera in the parking lot to record any future criminal suspect’s vehicle. But there was apparently a problem that night and the machine malfunctioned. So authorities had no video leads in the grisly slaying.

I was impressed—okay, I’ll admit, jealous—as Clay Burrel broke one scoop after another regarding the homicide, starting with the fact that the woman’s head was missing.

((CLAY, LIVE))

WITHOUT THE VICTIM’S  
HEAD . . . IDENTIFICATION IS  
DIFFICULT UNLESS HER DNA  
OR FINGERPRINTS ARE ON  
FILE . . . AND SO FAR,

AUTHORITIES ARE COMING UP  
EMPTY ON THAT END.

Besides making it problematic for the police, I've often found that without the victim's name, face, or history, it's difficult to get viewers to care about a specific murder amid so much crime.

So at first, it didn't bother me that I was missing out on the missing-head case. The way news assignments generally work, if you claim a story, it's yours. You eat what you kill. Clay found the story; Clay owned it.

But interest in the murder continued to escalate as our new reporter explained that the victim had a nice manicure and pedicure, thus eliminating homeless women and making the deceased seem a whole lot like all the other women sitting home watching the news, doing their nails.

Or maybe it was simply curiosity about Clay Burrell that made them click their remotes our direction.

With his Texas background, he was a little more flamboyant than the rest of the Channel 3 news team. Though he didn't wear a cliché ten-gallon hat, he had several pairs of distinctive cowboy boots. (I suspected he wore them to appear taller. With the six-foot-five-inch exception of NBC's David Gregory, many TV news guys, like Clay, tend to be on the short side—and self-conscious about it.) But viewers seemed instantly enamored with Burrell's faint drawl and Texas colloquialisms as he chatted with the anchors about the status of the mystery.

((CLAY/ANCHOR/SPLIT BOX))  
SERIOUSLY, SOPHIE, WITHOUT  
THE WOMAN'S HEAD, POLICE  
STAND ABOUT AS MUCH  
CHANCE OF SOLVING THIS  
MURDER AS A GNAT IN A  
HAILSTORM.

I could see him becoming as popular as Dan Rather once was on election nights.

Noreen was thrilled with her young and hungry new hire because for the first time since she had taken over the newsroom four years ago, her job was on the line.

Channel 3's market share was tanking after Nielsen installed a new ratings-measuring system in the Twin Cities—electronic people meters. The media-monitoring company claimed the devices were more accurate than the former handwritten diary system and could reveal ratings year-round instead of just in designated sweeps months.

This was supposed to take the drama out of February, May, and November, when television stations artificially stacked their newscasts with sensational stories of sin and scandal. In reality, newsrooms were now finding every month becoming a sweeps month.

"When it's done, it airs," Noreen had told us in a recent news meeting. Which introduced, in my opinion, an unhealthy—even desperate—speed-up factor to news investigations.

"I'm not interested in philosophy," she responded when I tried to discuss the matter. "I'm interested in results."

Not these results. How *many* people are watching the news isn't as important as *which* people are watching. And women viewers ages twenty-five or fifty-four are the prize demographics.

Under the new ratings system, Channel 3 had fallen from a normally close second in that coveted tier to a distant third. That audience drop made our newscasts less attractive to advertisers and meant our sales staff couldn't charge as much for the ads they did land. Barely six hundred people meters are used in the Minneapolis–St. Paul market to gauge the television habits of three million viewers. The station's owners cried foul over how the new Nielsen households were selected. But Nielsen didn't care.

Then Clay Burrell came along with tantalizing tidbits of murder and mayhem, and overnight, the numbers started shifting.

I was in the station green room, pulling a ceramic hot iron and styling brush out of my cubby for a quick touch-up before leaving to shoot a standup about identity theft. As I gazed in the mirror while I flipped my hair under, I appreciated the decades of history the green walls reflected.

Besides news talent, famous guests—presidents, athletes, even a rock star fond of the color purple—signed their names on these walls. I noticed a fresh addition, larger than the rest, as conspicuous as John Hancock’s on the Declaration of Independence. The sweeping signature read “Clay Burrel.” I actually wasn’t surprised, as I’d heard more than once over the last couple of days that everything was bigger in Texas.

As if on cue, Clay walked in to powder his nose and share with me the news that he was about to go on the air and inform viewers that “sources now tell” him the victim in the missing-head case was a natural blonde.

I congratulated him on his legwork. Then he started grumbling about how, when he accepted this job, he thought he was joining one of the top news teams in the market. Instead, by the looks of things, he *was* the top.

“I guess what they say about Texans and bragging is true,” I replied, a little miffed he was acting like a star right out the gate.

“If you’ve done it, it ain’t bragging, little lady.”

“Stop calling me that.” The moniker was as condescending as a pat on the head.

“Sure don’t mean anything by it,” he said. “Just keep hearing what a hotshot investigator you are and so far I haven’t seen much investigating. Makes me wonder if you’re all hat and no cattle.”

I threw him a much-practiced If Looks Could Kill glare but instead of shutting up, he told me I was about as “cute as a possum.”

That was when I vowed to steal the headless murder story from him and make it mine.