

Chapter 1

Damn it! I hate computers.

They sneak up on you, make you dependent upon them and then they never work right. I'm ready to take the one on my desk and give it to the kids in my class to play with in the sand and water table. Five years olds will do anything to please their teacher!

Unfortunately it's the Friday before Spring break and the kids have all gone home. I'll have to wait for them to get back to torture my computer.

I clicked on the icon for my mail and it actually came up. Then the stupid machine shut itself down. Shaking my head, I pushed the button and start it up again. Luckily the one thing it does do well is turn on.

The computer hummed, beeped, and flashed unidentified words and images as it came alive. Glancing down, I noticed blue and pink frosting smeared across the front of my light green jumper. Now, which child, while giving me hugs as they left, gave me this little gift to remember them by? It didn't matter; I loved my job and the kids in my class. And I was smart enough to buy wash and wear clothes.

I have a lot of problems with this computer. But the most aggravating one is that it has issues with displaying the correct date. I didn't want to look, but my eyes were forced to the top of the screen. There it was -- May 19, 1998.

I just changed that date this morning. I leaned back in my chair. May 19, 1998. It was the same date I'd seen for about a month, now. Of course before that it was another date. According to the techs that was one of the problems with this glitch in my system. If it was always the same date, they could figure out why. But because it always changed, it was a mystery they couldn't solve. I was an expert at correcting the date. A few strokes of the keyboard and it was fixed, again.

I logged onto the e-mail system to retrieve my mail. Seventeen ads for Viagra, twelve for vacation get-a-ways, and one from a retired teacher flashed on the screen. Luckily, I've learned how to use the delete key, too. I removed the twenty-nine unwanted e-mails and opened Julie's. It was just a quick note to tell me she was leaving on a romantic cruise to the Panama Canal tomorrow. Julie was single, sixty-two and looking for love. Weren't we all?

I sent her a quick note about having a great time on the cruise, asked her to keep an eye out for a man for me, and then spent several lines complaining about my idiotic computer. She wasn't a big fan either, so I knew I had a sympathetic ear for my ranting.

It was almost five o'clock before I had my classroom ready for Monday after Spring Break. I gathered up my purse and bag that contained the student's journals, my homework for the break. I needed to answer their latest entries and then add one of my own. At this point in the year a few of them were actually writing in their own journals. Of course, they're still getting help from their parents, but it's nice to see a few of them giving it a try.

I glanced at the computer. It looked like Julie had written back already, so I opened her mail. She acknowledged receiving my note, said how rushed she felt packing for her cruise, added an explicit curse about the stupidity of computers, and a question. Didn't something bizarre happen on May 19, 1998? Leave it to her to recognize a date. She was a big news buff. In fact, if you ever wanted to know anything about anybody or any country, you could ask her. Julie watched the news at least seven times a day and had an opinion on everything.

The date didn't mean anything to me. I opened up the Internet and went to HYPERLINK "http://www.askjeeves." I typed in: "What happened on May 19, 1998?" It took only a few seconds before I had 3,937 hits.

I started opening them up. It had been a very busy day. A train derailment in Geneva, an earthquake in Argentina, several car accidents, and even a bank hold-up by a masked bandit. None of them made any impression on me until the tenth. A child's school photo opened up. The little girl had that forced smile kids get when they're uncomfortable posing for a stranger. I glanced at the words over the photo: "Child kidnapped."

I didn't recognize the child's face but the words echoed in my head and reopened a deep wound in my heart. It was a hurt that had been bandaged with several therapy sessions, prescription drugs, and years of trying to forget. I leaned back against the seat and wiped the tear that rolled down my cheek. "Oh, Sandy," I whispered and let out long sigh. The memories I had spent so long pushing deep into my subconscious came flooding back.

Sandy had been my best friend. We'd met in second grade and became inseparable. Everyday she'd walked the two blocks from her house and knocked on my door. I'd give her the strawberry Pop tart I'd sneaked for her. Sandy's mom didn't believe in sugar for breakfast; mine went for the quick and easy meal. We walked to school together, and always took the same classes, even when one of us wasn't interested. We laughed together at the girls who would do anything to be popular and drooled over the boys on the baseball team.

If anyone bothered one of us, they'd have the other to deal with. Everyday after school, we'd walk home together. She'd drop me off at my house, I'd wave at her, and then she'd walk home. For six years, it had been the same.

Until that day. We'd both procrastinated too long on our science project and it was the due the next day. I'd barely waved goodbye to her. I went directly to my room and started typing. Two hours later, my mom had brought me the phone. I was sure it was Sandy, gloating that she was finished and I was only on page seven of fifteen. But it hadn't been her; it was her mom.

"Is Sandy there?" she'd asked.

"No, she's at home working on the stupid science report."

Her mom's voice trembled. "No ... she's not."

"What do you mean, she's not? I waved to her and she went home."

Silence. Crying. Then Sandy's dad. "She never made it home."

I couldn't believe it. What do you mean she wasn't home? The next days were like a whirlwind. Talking to the police, putting up flyers, searching parks and wooded areas near our

town. Everyday - still no Sandy. After a couple of weeks, everyone stopped looking. Except me. Every flyer that came down, I put up a new one. That's when the nightmares started. I'd wake up screaming and my dad would hold me until he'd promised to help me look for her. In the evening, we'd go out and search again. Looking for my best friend.

A month later, we got the call. They found Sandy's body in a ravine on the outskirts of town. She was dead. I was so angry. I felt like a failure. I hadn't been there for my best friend and now she was gone, forever.

The face that starred back at me from the screen wasn't Sandy. It was another child that had been kidnapped. She'd been torn away from her family and her friends, maybe even a best friend. I flipped through the screens. The little girl's name was Jessie McGowan and she'd never been found. I took notes on the information from the computer. Three hours later, I was startled when Andy, the night janitor, walked into my room.

"Liza! What are you still doing here?" he asked, as he grabbed the garbage can next to my desk. "I thought everyone cut out of here right after the kids went home."

"I started doing something on the computer and lost track of time," I said by way of explanation. I was often at school late, but never this late.

"Well, I'll be turning the alarm on in about thirty minutes." The lines in his face deepened and he shook his finger at me. "You don't want to be here when I set it."

"I'm just packing up now." I pantomimed fright and then winked at him. "I'll make sure I'm out of here by then."

"Okay, Liza." The smile returned to his face. "Have a great break. I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

"Thanks, Andy."

I shut down my computer, threw the notes I'd taken on Jessie's kidnapping into my bag, and left. I didn't want to accidentally set off the alarm. It cost the school money and the principal had a fit when it happened. All the way home I kept glancing over at my bag. It took me about thirty minutes to get home, so while I drove I thought about what I'd found on the Internet.

May 19, 1998, was the day that little Jessie McGowan had disappeared. I don't know how I could have forgotten about that. It was big news. She was six years old and was walking home from school with her brother. Their house was only five blocks from the school. Her parents owned a local grocery store, Gainsville Market. Her brother, Todd, was nine and the family felt comfortable with them walking home. I remember our school district sent out several notices to parents about not letting their children walk home after the kidnapping even though it happened several hundred miles away from my school.

Traffic was terrible but it gave me more time to think. I remember reading Todd's account of what happened that day.

"We were walking and a white van with ice cream signs on it pulled up next to us. A man in a clown suit leaned out and asked us if we wanted to buy any ice cream. Jessie stepped toward the van. The man grabbed her and pulled her in. Then he drove off. I chased the van, running as

fast as I could, but I couldn't catch it. I ran to our house, dialed 911 and the police came right away."

The story was in all the papers and on television. I remember thinking about Sandy on those days and then pushing those memories away, again.

Unfortunately, Todd didn't get the license plate of the van. Hot lines were set up, tips were followed, but Jessie was never found.

When I pulled into my driveway I heard the familiar sound of my dog, Shelby. She's a stray that wandered into my garage one day and just stayed. I gathered up my bag and purse and went to the front door.

As soon as I opened it, Shelby leapt at me.

"Easy girl," I said, between pushing her down and juggling my purse and bag.

Finally I set my stuff down and turned my attention to the bouncing dog. When I sat down on the floor, she jumped into my lap. I leaned over and grabbed one of her toys from the ground. We played tug-a-war for a while and then I got up. Shelby leapt up again.

"No more, girl. I'm starving." I went into the kitchen, rummaged through the refrigerator, and found some leftover tri-tip from the night before. I made myself a sandwich, sat down at the dining room table, and took out my notes.

Three hours later, I knew a few more things about Jessie, her family, and the community where she lived. Gainesville was a small city nestled at the foot of the Sierra Nevada. Jessie's parents, Martha and Dave, owned a small grocery store in town. The FBI was involved in the case, but most of the quotes were from a young local sheriff, Tom Owens. He'd organized a local search of the area and the surrounding foothills. He seemed to be taking Jessie's kidnapping personally and I wondered if he was a friend of the family.

No physical evidence was ever found to suggest that she was kept in the area after she was abducted. At midnight, I closed my notes. Gainesville was only a few hours drive. I didn't have any plans for Spring Break.

Today, Jessie would be sixteen years old. I hadn't been able to really help in finding Sandy. I'd been a child myself. But now I was an adult. I wondered where Jessie was? Was she alive? Would searching for her help heal the hurt and sense of loss I still felt? There was only one way to find out.