

Chapter 1

Ben Stephens worked in a real estate office. It wasn't his dream job. But it paid the bills.

At work he never mentioned his family. He talked a lot about Kerry Underwood. She was his steady girlfriend. But he never said a word about his brother, Roy.

That was because Roy was on death row in state prison. Ben wasn't about to share something like that. He'd been horrified when Roy and another guy were arrested. The two had robbed a liquor store. But it had ended in the death of a young clerk.

Roy had been a troublemaker. He'd gotten kicked out of high school. He'd ended up in a juvenile detention camp when he was sixteen. Nothing seemed to turn

him around. Roy took up with an older criminal. The guy's name was Pulver. From there things had only gone downhill.

Ben thought about that awful night a lot. The young clerk, Carlos Oliver, had pulled out a gun. He'd managed to fire one shot. It had mortally wounded Pulver. At the same moment, Oliver had taken a slug to the chest. It killed him a few days later. Before Pulver died, he said Roy had fired the shot that killed the clerk.

Roy hid out for a week. Then the police found him. Of course he had denied being the gunman. He denied being there at all. But why wouldn't he deny it? He was looking at a murder rap.

After a very quick trial, Roy was convicted of first degree murder. He was sentenced to death. It didn't seem real. The horrible event was still hard for Ben to believe.

“Hey, Ben,” a coworker said. “There's a

couple coming over to look at that house on Auburn. Can you handle it?”

“Sure thing,” Ben said. He was the youngest agent in the office. But he was doing pretty well. He was a personable guy.

Ben worked hard to match buyers and sellers. Because he was new, he didn’t get the choice listings. But he did very well with those he got. One was the house on Auburn. It was in a rundown neighborhood. Only someone without much money for a down payment would want to buy it.

Ben pulled out a fact sheet about the listing. He waited for the clients to arrive. While he waited, his thoughts drifted back to his kid brother. Ben was twenty-four now. Roy was two years younger. When they were kids, they were active. They rode their bikes. Played baseball. Surfed.

Now it took some effort to remember when Roy was a little kid. He had been cute

and funny. Roy always looked up to his big brother.

Many bad things had happened since childhood. Ben remembered the screaming fights between Roy and their parents. Their parents had made desperate efforts to keep Roy out of trouble. But nothing helped. There were times he ran away. Times he was busted for drugs. Mom cried. Dad cursed. Then came the murder charge, and the agony of the trial. Finally, the death sentence.

Sometimes Ben woke up in a cold sweat. In one of his nightmares, Roy had escaped from death row. He was standing in Ben's bedroom. "*I didn't do it, Ben,*" Roy said. "*I swear I didn't. I wasn't even there. No way! You got to hide me. You got to get me out of this. Remember when the big kids on Illinois Street got after me? You made them back down. You could always fix things for me. You were there for me every time. I swear I'm innocent. Don't let them kill me, bro.*"

Always nightmares. They never stopped. Ben shook off the memories. He reviewed his listing.

The young couple arrived at the real estate office. Ben drove them to the house on Auburn.

“We don’t have much money to put down,” Mr. Gonzales said. “Just what our parents have loaned us.”

Mrs. Gonzales was expecting a baby. She was still working part-time. “We don’t want a big fancy house. Or anything like that,” she said. “It’s okay if it’s a fixer-upper. Hector is very handy. I’m good at sewing and crafting. We can make a plain little house look good.”

“Well, this is a nice starter house,” Ben said. It’s been rented for a year or so. And I have to be honest, it’s not in great shape. You’ll see. The place is vacant. It really needs some loving care.”

Ben was embarrassed when they pulled

up to the small single-story house. The yard was full of weeds. The place looked awful. Would the young couple even get out of the car? But they both jumped out and hurried to the front door.

“I see potential here. It’s really cute,” Mrs. Gonzales said once they were inside. “This kitchen needs a good cleaning and some fresh paint. Then it will be perfect.”

Ben followed them through the rooms. His mind wandered. Roy had a girlfriend at the time the murder was committed. She was a pretty girl named Noreen. Ben liked her. He had hoped she could turn his brother around. Maybe she was the one to get him back on the right path.

Noreen testified at the trial. Roy had been with her when the shooting took place. But then she admitted to being drunk that night. Both of them were drunk, she had said. Then she got her facts mixed up. The

jury discounted everything she said. Noreen left the stand sobbing.

The excited home buyers roamed the house. Ben lost track of the conversation. He thought about Roy. Time was running out. Roy's execution probably wouldn't happen for several more years. There were always more appeals to exhaust. But eventually it would happen. Ben couldn't even think about it.

"We want to make an offer," Mr. Gonzales said. Ben snapped out of his daze.

By the time they left his office a few hours later, the deal was done. In all the excitement, Ben had forgotten about his brother's problems. He was thrilled to have sold a house. He had to call Kerry so they could get together for a little celebration.



Ben got home late. Then it all crashed on him again. He hadn't called his parents

for a few days. Every time he did call, the conversation was mostly about Roy. It was always so depressing. Ben dreaded talking to them. But he reached for his phone. He had to—especially for his mom’s sake. His parents had lost their youngest son. He owed it to them to be a stand-up guy.

“Hi, Mom. How’s it going?” he asked.

“Hello, Ben. I’m okay. I went to church today and lit a candle for Roy. Maybe I’m the only person in the world still praying for him. But I’ll never stop,” Mom said. Her voice was sad.

Ben closed his eyes. He remembered the parents of the murdered liquor store clerk. They had come to the trial every day. Their eyes showed the hatred they felt in their hearts for Roy.

At the penalty phase of the trial, both parents had taken the stand. Their grief and bitterness were obvious. They’d demanded Roy’s life in payment for the loss of their

only son. The jury was moved. It had taken them only four hours to recommend the death penalty.

“Yeah, Mom,” Ben said. “Well, keep on praying. You always did your best for Roy. Dad too.”

“I don’t know, Ben,” she said sadly. “Maybe we didn’t. I keep wondering about it. Your father always said I was too easy on Roy. He says I spoiled him. And that’s why he went bad. But God knows I never meant to hurt that boy. How can a mother turn her back on her child?” Mom said.

Dad wasn’t out there lighting candles for his son. Ben was sure of that. Dad was angry. He said he’d never forgive Roy for bringing such shame on the family. The poor man was so bitter. Sometimes Ben thought that all the trouble they’d had was eating his dad alive. He wouldn’t even allow the mention of Roy’s name in the house.

His mom sighed heavily. “Ben, sometimes

I wonder,” Mom said glumly. “Do you ever wonder?”

“About what, Mom?” Ben asked.

“You know, if he did it. If Roy really killed that man. He swears he didn’t,” Mom said.

The poor woman was grasping at straws. Ben figured she must be in denial.

“The jury was convinced, Mom. They checked Pulver’s hands, remember? He hadn’t fired a gun. So we know he didn’t shoot the clerk. And he testified that Roy did. Why would a dying guy rat out his best friend if it was a lie? Pulver must have known it was truth time. He was dying. And the clerk identified Roy in a picture before he died,” Ben said.

“But they never found the gun, Ben. You know they never did find the gun,” his mom said.

“Yeah, they figure he tossed it into a storm drain. He’d been hiding out for a week. Why did Roy go into hiding right

after the murder? If he really was innocent, he should have come forward. And science would have shown he hadn't fired the gun, right?" Ben said.

"Oh, but he was scared when he heard what happened! Roy always ran and hid when he was scared. You remember that. A mother should know. Shouldn't she? If my boy had done such a terrible thing, wouldn't I know it in my heart?"

"I don't think so, Mom. You always gave Roy the benefit of the doubt. But that's okay. It's mother's love," Ben said, trying to comfort her.

Mom started crying then. "I don't know, Ben," she said. "I suppose so." Then, with another sigh, she hung up.

Ben slumped down onto the sofa. He didn't feel much like celebrating the sale of the house on Auburn Street. He pressed his fingertips into his tired eyes.

Was there even a remote possibility that

Roy was innocent? Was there the slightest ghost of a chance? Ben sighed and thought of his mom again.

Maybe he and Kerry should get married soon. That would be the best thing for his family. Especially when the first baby came. A new life would help everyone forget about the end of Roy's life.