

## ONE

Abigail Barnes was in her blue, 2013 BMW 328i convertible, top down, cruising slowly along the main drag of downtown Hackensack, NJ, when she first saw Hector. It was around 9:15 p.m. on a warm Tuesday night. Main Street was a one-way, two-lane road and was almost deserted, which seemed strange to Abigail. There were lights on in many of the stores she passed but not many people shopping or walking or loitering on the sidewalks nor many cars driving down the street.

She heard a muffled pop, like the sound of a car backfiring in a garage maybe a block away. The sound registered absently somewhere in the back of her mind, so much so that she barely even noticed it.

Up ahead about a half a block away, a man exited a liquor store. He was wearing nothing but dingy white undershorts and what looked like shower sandals. His legs were long and skinny and slightly hairy. She could almost see the ribs in his thin frame. His brown hair was on the longish side and disheveled, like he had just gotten out of bed. He carried a black, pump-action shotgun in his right hand and what looked like a six pack of beer cradled in his left arm, as if he were carrying a football.

He walked out calmly into the middle of the street, stopped in front of Abigail's car, and leveled the shotgun, one-handed, rather casually at her windshield.

She stopped about two feet in front of the man and waited.

"I need a ride," he said matter-of-factly.

She nodded without saying anything, and he made his way around the car. She leaned over, opened the door, and the man got in. She watched as he carefully laid the six-pack of beer on the floor between his feet and then tucked the shotgun in between the two front seats, business end pointing forward.

Abigail looked at the man. He was young, maybe twenty or twenty-five, obviously Hispanic, grungy, unshaven with about two days-worth of stubble on his face.

The man settled in and then reached down and pulled a beer out of the plastic holder. He seemed to notice that the car was not moving and then looked over at Abigail.

She smiled at him and said, "Where to, Sport?"

He motioned forward with the beer and said, "Just head up that way a few blocks, then turn left I guess. I live back the other way."

She put the car in gear and began slowly driving in the same direction she had been heading. As she got about a block or so on, the loud, piercing sound of an alarm began blaring behind them, apparently coming from the liquor store the man had just exited.

Neither one of them said anything.

She continued on, driving slowly, and the man sitting next to her popped the tab on his beer can and took a long pull.

She drove for about two or three blocks, came to an old brick building that looked like it could have been a department store from the 1950s and turned left, then left again onto State Street and began heading back in the direction they had come.

"Thanks for stopping," he said. He took another sip of beer. "These slippers are good for when you're laying around the house but not too good for walking in."

"Not too good for looking at either," she replied.

He looked at her blankly for a second, and she just smiled back.

"So, what's your name?" he asked.

“Abby.”

“I appreciate the ride, Gabby. You want one of these beers?” the man asked her.

She didn’t correct him on her name. “They cold?”

“Sure they’re cold. I just took the damn six pack out of the freezer at that liquor store back there.”

“Okay then, pop me one.”

The man set his can between his legs, careful not to spill any beer on the leather seat, then reached down and pulled another can out of the plastic holder, popped the tab, and handed it to Abigail.

They heard sirens in the distance and then saw the flashing lights of a police cruiser go screaming across the intersection up ahead, moving left in the direction of Main Street.

“You shoot somebody?” she asked taking a small, delicate sip of her beer.

“Naw, that asshole Arab ran out the back soon as he saw me. Was gonna shoot his sorry ass he hung around. I shot the fucking register though. Had to shoot something.”

“You rob the place?”

“Just this six pack.”

“You went in there with a shotgun, blew up the register, and didn’t take any money?”

He looked at her and tilted his head on just a bit of an angle.

“Just where the fuck you think I was gonna to put the money? Can’t you see I don’t got no pants on?”

Abigail nodded her head once and kept driving, right past the Hackensack Police Department building on the right. Neither of them spoke a word as they passed.

They drove on in relative silence for the next few minutes, the only conversation a “turn left here” or “turn right up there” until he had directed her to his house, a shoddy, rundown two-family dwelling on the south side of town.

“That’s it there,” he said, “I live upstairs.” She pulled to a stop in front as he gathered his beer, opened the door and then shut it with his rump. “Thanks again for stopping. I guess I’ll see you around.” He stepped into the overgrown yard carrying his beers in one hand and scratching his rear absently with the other. He shuffled along the cracked concrete walkway in his shower slippers and up the stairs and onto the porch, then through one of the two front doors and into the house.

She watched him the whole way and waited for a full minute after he disappeared inside. A light came on in one of the rooms on the second floor, and she decided to wait a minute more to see if he would come back down again to get his shotgun. When he didn’t, she put the car in drive and headed back to the Holiday Inn on Route 17 where she had gotten a room.

She was planning to take a nice hot shower and maybe watch some TV.

\* \* \* \* \*

At around 11 a.m. the next day, Hector Perez was just finishing shaving when he heard the knock on his door. He was wearing a pair of black jeans, no shirt and no socks or shoes. He walked to the door, put his hand on the doorknob and then leaned slightly in to the door and asked softly, “Who is it?”

“It’s Gabby.” It was a girl’s voice.

“Who?”

“The girl you carjacked last night.”

He opened the door and saw a very attractive young blond woman standing there. She was a white girl, with very white skin; piercing, electric blue eyes, and a sort of round face framed by shoulder-length hair that added to her youthful appearance. She was average height for a girl with a well-rounded, curvy body that looked more solid than it did plump. She had on a white blouse that matched her very white teeth and blue jeans with black cowboy boots. She was carrying a six-pack of beer in one hand. In the other was his Maverick 88 pump action shotgun, angled upward and pointed directly at him at just about crotch height.

He just looked at her and didn't say anything.

"You want to back up some and maybe let me in there, Sport?"

He backed up, and she entered, keeping the shotgun level with his testicles.

When they were both inside, she gently kicked the door closed with her boot without turning around and then stuck out the hand with the beer and said, "How about you open two of these and put the others in the fridge?"

He pulled two beers out and set them on the scarred coffee table, then went into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and put the rest of the beer on the shelf.

When he came back into the living area, she was sitting on his couch, the shotgun across her lap, an open beer sitting on the table in front of her.

"I bought these beers at that same store you shot up last night," she said. "They got a brand new, shiny register all set up already and are open for business. Was a guy up on a ladder putting in a closed-circuit video camera. That's actually why I went in. Wanted to see if they had a camera. Lucky for you they didn't, but I wouldn't go in there again for a while if I were you."

She took a sip of beer and smiled at him.

"What you doing here?" he asked. "Thought I'd never see you again."

"Well, you left your gun in my car," she said gently patting the shotgun on her lap.

She slid the pump down hard, the metal clanging loudly in the small room, and left the breech open, showing him the gun was unloaded.

"I took the shells out last night." She reached into her shirt pocket and pulled out two green plastic shotgun shells, which she set upright on the coffee table.

"You ought to clean this thing," she said, lifting the gun slightly, rolling it back and forth to catch the light and peering into the breech, "it's gonna start jamming on you, you don't get a patch in there soon." She stood up, walked across the room, and set the shotgun against the far wall, then returned to her seat on the couch.

He didn't say anything, just sat there looking at her.

"What's your name, Sport?"

"Name is Hector," he said.

"Can I ask you something, Hector? It's been bothering me ever since last night. It's the real reason I drove over here, I mean besides returning that dirty old gun you left in my car. What the heck were you doing in the middle of town with a loaded shotgun wearing nothing but your underwear, stealing a fucking six-pack of beer? For the life of me, I can't figure that one out."

He didn't answer for a minute, then a smile formed on his lips, and he looked down at the floor.

"I got pretty wasted yesterday. Started early, you know? Stopped by the liquor store late afternoon to buy more beer; that fucking Arab douche bag wouldn't sell me any. Said he couldn't sell beer to a drunken wetback. Can you believe that shit? Got a towel wrapped round his head and everything. I came back here, decided to sleep it off. Then my friend Jules showed up, and I tell him the story. He says we should go back there and teach that fucker a lesson. I'm still pretty wasted, not really

thinking, you know? So I get my shotgun, and we get in his car, and we head over.”

“With no pants,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I decided kind of sudden like. So we head over and Jules, he was gonna wait out front. But I guess when he heard the shot, he got scared and took off.”

“Nope,” she said, shaking her head from side to side, “he wasn’t there when the shot went off. I was just coming up on the liquor store when I heard the shot. There wasn’t any car out front.”

Hector stopped smiling.

“Some friend you got there, Hector. Maybe you should take those pants off, climb back into your underwear, grab that shotgun over there, and we’ll take a ride over to Jules’s house, maybe teach *him* a lesson.”

Hector picked up his beer, popped the top, and took a sip. He kept the beer close to his face and looked at Abigail over the can, not saying anything.

She smiled back at him. “Got something on your mind, Sport? Or maybe that beer’s not sitting too well after a rough night.”

He lowered the beer away from his face. “I wanna know what’s a nice white chick like you doing coming here to my house swinging that shotgun around like it’s your fucking purse? How come you didn’t call the cops last night or start screaming or crying when I got in your car? What’s up with that shit? You sit there, act like you some badass biker chick want to go teach Jules a lesson but you look like a stuck-up college girl, all clean and white and pretty, driving yourself around in that shiny new beemer.”

Abigail smiled at him – a big, beautiful smile. “Well, that beemer’s not exactly new but, yeah, Hector, you know, you’re absolutely right. I never even thought about it like that. How about that shit? I’m really something, huh?”

Hector looked at her blankly for a few seconds, then smiled back, and shook his head gently. “Yeah girl, you really something.”

They each had another beer. She told Hector about driving up north from Baltimore and getting a room at a local hotel just a few towns away on Route 17. She told him she was planning to stay around for a while and was looking for work.

“What kind of work you do?” he asked.

“Well, I can do a lot of things,” she said, “but what I did back in Baltimore was mostly collections.”

“Yeah, what shit you collect?”

“Money.”

“You mean like I don’t pay my bill, and you call me on the phone and say, hey, I work for Sears, why you don’t pay your bills asshole? And then you send a letter and keep calling until I get so sick of the phone calls that I change my number or pay my bill?”

“Well, mostly I go visit in person and ask for the money real nice.”

“Sears sends people out to collect money?”

“I don’t do work for Sears, Hector. Look, let’s say you like to bet money on football games. Let’s say you bet five grand on the Super Bowl, and you lose. Then you realize that, hey, maybe you can’t or don’t want to pay up the five grand. That’s the type of collections I do.”

“You work for fucking bookies? You? You must be shitting me.” Hector started laughing out loud and only stopped after seeing that Abigail was not laughing at all or even smiling but rather looking at him with hard, squinty eyes.

He also realized that the look she was giving him made him somewhat uncomfortable.

“Sometimes bookies,” she said after a moment, “sometimes loan sharks. Sometimes other people want to get paid what they’re owed.”

“Yeah, okay,” he said getting up, “so you want another beer?”

“I thought maybe you could help me out here, Hector, you know, help me find work. I helped you out last night when you needed a ride. I brought you your shotgun back. I just got into town; you’re the first person I’ve met. I thought maybe you might be able to hook me up.”

He walked into the kitchen and came back carrying the last two beers.

“Look, no offense, okay, but the people I know, they don’t send some pretty white chick to collect their money. They send some gorilla looking dude put a gun to your head, you know, like that. I don’t know about Baltimore, but around here you don’t get some guy to pay the money he owe by smiling nice or showing him your tits. That just gets you fucked, right in your ass, big time. You want a job collecting money, we got a Sears right here in town.”

Abigail listened and nodded her head thoughtfully. She took the beer Hector had put down on the table in front of her and popped the top.

“What about you, Hector. You seem like a nice guy. I bet people hit you up for money all the time. You have someone owes you some money? Maybe someone has the money but doesn’t want to pay? Maybe someone that you lent money to, even though you didn’t really want to lend it to them in the first place?”

“Shit, yeah, I got people owe me money. Not anyone I introduce a nice girl like you to, though.”

“Tell you what, Hector. Let’s finish these beers and go for a ride. See if maybe I can’t sweet talk one of your nice friends into paying you back the money they owe.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Joey Lonza lived in Lodi in the same house that he grew up in. Both his parents were deceased, and he had inherited the house free and clear. He was a big man, thirty-two years old, just over six feet and close to three hundred pounds, more fat than muscle. He worked part time as a bouncer at a strip club on the Clifton border just off Route 46 and also sold drugs on the side.

Abigail and Hector pulled up outside his house about 1:30 in the afternoon.

“How much does he owe you?” she asked as they got out of the car.

“I lent him a grand. He said he had a line on some good weed, was going to give me fifteen hundred in a week at most. That was about a month ago I guess. I call him every couple a days just to bust his balls. Joey’s okay, but I’m kinda tired of hearing the same story, you know. I want to see you work some magic on him, charm the big guy outa my money.”

They started walking up the driveway toward the house and then she stopped suddenly.

“Wait a sec, I want to get my purse.” She turned and headed back to the car.

He saw her walk around to the driver’s side, open the door and then reach down by her seat. She fumbled with something, then pulled a leather purse that looked more like a saddlebag up from the floor. She then reached into the back seat and brought out a short, red, leather jacket that she put on and then she closed the door. She put the purse strap over her shoulder and shoved both hands into the pockets of her jacket and walked back up the driveway to where Hector stood waiting.

“Shit girl, you want to take a few more minutes, check your make-up or put some deodorant on or something?” he asked. “Maybe eat one of those breath mints so your mouth is all fresh and minty case he makes you suck his dick before he gives me my money?”

“Deodorant? Are you saying I have body odor?”

They got to the door, and Hector knocked hard three times. They waited about a minute and got no response. Then Hector knocked three times hard again.

“Go away you moke!” It was a deep male voice that sounded sort of muffled from inside.

“Yo, Joey, it’s Hector, man. Open up. I brought a friend. We want to party, man; open the door.”

They heard footsteps and then the door opened about two inches and stopped short from a security chain. A large nose with a full beard and mustache under it appeared.

“Joey, open up, man. This here is Gabby. We just stopped by to party.”

The door closed, and they heard the security chain slide off and then the door opened again, and a tall, fat, bearded man stood there wearing a silky, white, warm-up suit with emerald-green stripes down the sides of the legs and matching green piping around the cuffs of his sleeves and collar. On his feet were a pair of gleaming, white Nike sneakers. He had a thick, gold chain around his neck and a large, gold watch on his wrist.

“Hey, Hector. Who’s this little cream pie you brought with you?”

“This here is my friend Gabby.”

Joey Lonza smiled like a wolf, stepped back, and opened the door wider, letting Hector and Abigail walk in.

“Head on inside. Me and my man Tito, we were just packaging some product. Maybe you and your friend Gabby want to try a little taste.”

They walked into a sparse living room that smelled heavily of old cigarette smoke and stale pot. A small Hispanic man was sitting on a lounge chair, leaning over the coffee table, weighing white powder on an electronic scale and then portioning small amounts into glassine bags. There was also a pile of money on the table, what looked like mostly hundreds and fifties.

“Shit Joey, you done graduated,” said Hector, happily “looks like that little loan I give you been paying off pretty good, huh? Damn, man, look at this shit!”

“Well,” said Joey, “it ain’t paid off just yet. Like I told you a few days ago, I made an investment, and I’m just starting to roll with it now, you know? Just got to make a few more sales is all. Then I’ll have your money for you, day, two days most.”

Abigail walked over to the table, hands still in the pockets of her short, leather coat.

“Looks like you have plenty of money sitting right here, Joey,” she said sweetly, turning and smiling at him.

Joey didn’t smile back.

“That money there’s not mine. And why don’t you mind your own fucking business, sweetheart. You’re a guest here. What kind of manners you got? You may look like a tasty piece of ass, but good looks don’t make up for acting like a smartass cunt in someone else’s house.”

She walked over to Joey, still smiling, and looked up at him. Then, quick as a flash, her right hand came out of her jacket pocket, her arm swung back and then her fist shot out straight at his head. There was a thud, and Joey went flying back, pin wheeling his arms as he went until he hit the wall hard and then he seemed to stop and slide down the wall in slow motion, ending up sitting down on the floor, his body slumped slightly to one side.

Hector looked at Joey, then back at Abigail and then back at Joey again.

The big man seemed dazed – his eyes open but not really seeing anything. His head was lolling from side to side, and there was a large gash on his forehead, right about center between the eyes. A small but steady stream of blood was starting to trickle out of the cut and down the side of his nose and began to drip onto his shiny, white satin warm-up suit.

Tito stood up suddenly, banging his knee on the coffee table, knocking some of the white powder

to the floor, and Hector looked over just as Abigail's other hand was coming out of her oversized pocketbook with a large, stainless-steel revolver. She pointed the big gun at Tito, right at his nose, and said in a calm but firm voice, "Don't fucking move."

Tito slowly raised his hands in the air and didn't move.

"Put your hands on your head, lace the fingers together nice and tight."

He did as he was told.

"You Joey's partner? This your product, your money too?"

Tito didn't say a word, just nodded once.

"Well, you partner up with someone, go into business together, you assume part of his debt. Come out from there and walk over and face that wall." She pointed to where she wanted him to go with the big gun.

Again, he did as he was told.

"Get close. Lean in, feet back, put your nose right against the wall and don't move."

With Tito facing the wall, Gabby slid the gun back into her bag and then reached over and picked up the cash that was sitting on the table.

"We're gonna take the money that's owed us, the money that's ours. I'm counting out fifteen hundred, that's what fat Joey over there owes Hector. I'm taking another three hundred for myself. That's 20 percent to collect. No reason Hector here should take it out of his pocket, seeing as he had to wait so long to get paid. I'm putting the rest back on the table."

She let the money drop back down onto the table. A small puff of white powder blew up a few inches and then rained down again slowly like a soft, gentle fog.

"You got a problem with any of this, you or your partner, fat Joey, over there, I'll be back. But let me tell you, Tito, I gotta come back, there's gonna be trouble. You understand?"

She looked over at Hector, smiled sweetly and then winked.

"Come on Hector, it's time to leave. I'm starved. Let's go get a pizza or something."

She slid her arm through one of Hector's and led him to the front door. When they got there, she turned around. Joey was coming around, eyes starting to come into focus, staring at the blood stain on his shirt, Tito still facing the wall, hands locked together on his head.

"It was sure nice meeting you boys," she said and then she stepped out the door with Hector, gently closing the door behind her.