

Miami, Florida

Six weeks ago

He came to slowly, as if drifting out of a dense fog. His whole consciousness was focused on his right hand, which throbbed with an intense pain that was like nothing he had ever felt before. His throat was parched and swollen, so much so that he couldn't swallow and had trouble breathing. He was afraid that he might begin to gag and choke. His tongue felt like it was coated with Elmer's Glue and was stuck to the roof of his mouth. He knew something bad was happening, but couldn't quite remember what it was that had caused him to be here, his arms and feet immobile, duct-taped to this plastic chair.

His hand was burning; emanating heat like it was on fire.

Someone grabbed hold of his hair and jerked his head violently upward. It wasn't exceptionally painful, but it was a shock and he blinked trying to clear the tears out of his eyes so that he could see a little more clearly.

"Hey, are you awake? Good, I thought we lost you there for a minute." The voice was low and calm, almost kind.

A face suddenly appeared right in front of him, very close, eye-to-eye, their noses almost touching. Even in his dazed and confused state, he could still smell stale tobacco on the man's breath. The man's eyes were bright and sparkled with what could have been amusement, or perhaps a rush from something recently smoked or snorted, his hair slicked down on his head, held firm and tight with some sort of glistening hair gel.

Paul Diggardy tried to speak, but no words came out, just a dry croaking sound.

"What? What did you say? Do you know where he is? Where he is right now?" The face in front of him turned quickly to look behind, one hand pointing and then his fingers snapping as he said with some urgency, "*Alejandro, agua!*"

The face turned back and looked intensely into Paul Diggardy's eyes. A second later, a young man appeared carrying a plastic bottle of Poland Spring water. The man with tobacco breath reached behind him, this time without turning his head and took the bottle. He reached his hand around and pulled Paul's hair back so that his face was pointed to the ceiling and put the bottle to his lips, then poured the cool water into his mouth. The feeling was like heaven on his dry, swollen tongue and he sucked and slurped the water down trying hard not to gag.

"There, there, that is enough." The man stopped the flow of water and let go of his hair.

"Now, back to business. Do you know where he is? Where he is right now?"

Paul was not sure what the man was talking about and looked at him blankly. He was trying to focus on what the man was saying.

The man let go of his hair, took a step back and smiled warmly. Then he raised his right arm and slapped him hard, openhanded across the face. The blow was totally unexpected and snapped his head to the right. It stung his face without doing any real damage.

Paul's left cheek burned where the open hand had hit and his eyes immediately teared up again. A sob escaped him from somewhere deep inside, a feeling of almost overwhelming dread and hopelessness engulfed him as he suddenly remembered what

had happened to him and why he was sitting in this empty warehouse, taped to this plastic chair.

“Your friend. The one who broke in where he didn’t belong. Where is he?”

Paul cried freely and tried to talk to the man with tobacco breath between great heaving sobs, “I told you already,” his voice was low and hoarse, almost unrecognizable to his own ears, “he lives in Bonita Beach. He’s got an apartment, right there near 41 and Bonita Beach Rd. I don’t know the address.”

He took a long, gasping breath.

“There’s a motel, like a Motel 6, right across the street. Christ, I can’t remember nuthin’. Can I have some more water? Please?”

The man didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and then slowly he began pouring the remaining water from the Poland Spring bottle over the top of Paul’s head. Paul leaned his head back and opened his mouth, desperately trying to catch some of the water as it dribbled through his hair and down his face.

When the bottle was empty, the man began again.

“Your friend. Where is he now?”

“He ain’t my friend no more, that was a long time ago. We just grewed up together, is all. I heard he might’a been involved. It was just a rumor, see? I want to help y’all. I told you everything I know. Jesus, my hand, what did you do to my hand? Man, it hurts like hell. What’d you do?”

“Here, let me show you.”

The man grabbed Paul’s hair again and gently pulled his head down until his chin nearly touched his chest. His feet were taped to the legs of the chair so he could see the ground between his knees. Paul squeezed his eyes tight and tears ran down his cheeks. He didn’t want to see what was below him, but felt compelled to look. He opened his eyes and saw the man’s polished red cowboy boots. They were beautiful, the supple leather gleaming to a high shine. The man gently moved a small pile of bloody red stubs around with the pointy toe of one boot. Paul could see dirty fingernails on the ends of the stubs.

A low moan escaped his throat. He wasn’t even aware he was making the sound as he was totally focused on the small bloody pile between his legs.

“Small pleasures gone,” the man’s voice was soft and soothing, like he was telling a bedtime story, “Things that we take for granted every day—never even think about them. Scratching an itch, the tender caress to a beautiful woman’s breast, picking a particularly annoying bugger out of your own nose. What a shame.”

Paul was crying hard. He could hardly talk, the words coming out in a harsh, quiet whisper.

“Those are my fingers, man, you motherfuckers cut off my goddamn fingers.”

The man stood up. He reached into the pocket of his expensive sport coat and pulled out a phone. He hit the speed dial, put the phone to his ear and waited.

On the second ring, he heard a voice with a pronounced Hispanic accent answer. “Did he give you what we need?”

“We will work with him a little more, but I think he has given us all that he has. I will need to go across to the gulf coast, make a surprise visit, see if our friend is at home. We will have more business to conduct when we meet him.”

There was a minute of silence. Then, “Good. Stop by the office first. And bring me something.”

“Yes, of course,” he said. Then the line went dead.

“Alejandro,” he said addressing the young man who had handed him the water bottle, “*los otro dedos.*” The other fingers.

“*Todos?*”

“*Si, todos.*”

He watched the young man walk over to the worktable and pick up the bolt cutter with the long, blonde wooden handles now spattered and stained dark with blood. Two other young men who were standing a few feet away eating sandwiches dropped their food into a trash barrel and then made their way over to where Paul Diggardy sat taped to the chair, each grabbing hold of an arm and shoulder to keep him steady.

The man with the tobacco breath and shiny-red cowboy boots continued walking toward the door, which led out to the parking lot where the cars were parked. Paul screamed, but the scream was cut off suddenly as one of the young men cupped a hand roughly over his mouth. The man continued to the door, opened it and stepped out into the bright sunshine and intense heat of the Miami afternoon.

He didn't mind the heat, had in fact grown up with it in his home country. It was truly a beautiful day. He opened the trunk of his 8-series BMW, reached inside and pulled a single sheet off a battered roll of paper towels that was laying there. He then put his right foot up on the bumper and carefully wiped the blood off the toe of his boot. That done, he placed the soiled paper towel in a plastic bag, then grabbed a large glass jar filled with formaldehyde that was held secure in an elastic net attached to the inside of the trunk. Amazing what they come up with for their cars these Germans, he thought absently. He then opened a hidden compartment and extracted the sawed-off Remington 870 pump action shotgun.

His boss wanted him to bring something back to the office.

The jar was only large enough to hold the fingers.

But that was okay.

He didn't expect there was going to be much left of the head anyway.

ONE

Mendham, New Jersey

Friday

As a rule, Skooley did not like beaners. He grew up in a small town in south central Florida and though the area where he lived was fully integrated, he was taught early on to stick with his own kind.

His father worked, but only intermittently, and quite often in the fields right next to the illegals. He always thought of himself as better. Better because he was white. Better because he was born in Florida and a true American.

But Skooley had always known that his old man was just trailer trash and no better than anybody.

Still, he found that as a rule, he just didn't like beaners.

But Ray seemed all right. He was actually pretty smart, for a Mexican. It was Ray's idea to steal the bikes from his busboy buddies instead of taking Skooley's car. It was a long bike ride from the town of Bernardsville, NJ, where they were both staying in a rooming house to this driveway in Mendham, but he would have had to find a place to put his car, the stolen Toyota Camry, for a few hours unnoticed. He hadn't even gotten around to stealing a new set of plates and that could very well have posed a problem. This way, they just rode the bikes with their six pack of beer in the rusty metal basket right up to the private drive that actually looked more like a goddamn street than somebody's driveway and walked the bikes into the woods. There were plenty of other bicyclists on the road, though most of them were wearing spandex and sleek plastic helmets. Still, nobody paid he and Ray any mind. They laid the bikes down, then sat in the dirt and started drinking beer, smoking cigarettes and watching the house.

"Hey Skooley, what you think man? I don't see nobody."

Skooley turned and looked at Raymundo. Ray was a small, dark man, about twenty-three years old and maybe five-three with a thick build and unruly bushy black hair that fell over one eye. This caused him to twitch his head every so often to get the hair out of his face, which for some reason just annoyed the hell out of Skooley. He was wearing white painter's pants that had turned a dull gray, and a dingy New York Mets tee shirt with what looked like a faded yellow mustard stain just to the left of his navel. On his feet was a pristine pair of white Nike sneakers.

Skooley squinted his eyes and looked at the Mexican.

"Shit Ray, take it easy. We only just got here." He gave him his best friendly smile. "Let's give it a while. We got beer, the sun is shining, what more can you ask for? Hell, where I come from, days like this are few and far between. I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to sit in this here woods and just enjoy the day."

"What, you don't got woods in Florida?" He pronounced it Flor-eeda, like he was still in Mexico.

Skooley held his smile as he looked at Ray. "Where you from, anyway Ray?"

"Bernardsville, man, you know that."

"No, I mean before."

“Before Bernardsville? I live two years in Newark.”

“No, no, where in Mexico you from?”

“I from Guatemala.”

“They got woods like this in that part of Mexico?”

Ray looked back at him for a second, puzzled, then shook his head.

Skooley nodded, then leaned back against a tree with a beer in one hand and his cigarette in the other.

“There you go amigo. Where I grew up near Okeechobee, we got mostly just brush, maybe a scrub pine here or there, but there ain’t no hills or mountains and certainly no trees the likes of what we got surrounding us here. I feel like Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest. You ever hear of Robin Hood?”

Ray turned away from Skooley without answering and watched the house.

They sat in silence for a while and worked on finishing off the six-pack of beer, which was just starting to get warm. It was pleasant in the shade under the trees and Skooley closed his eyes and felt himself drifting off for just a second.

He awoke with a start, dazed and unsure of where he was. Someone or something was crashing through the woods. He jumped to his feet and saw Raymundo walking towards him from the direction of the house.

Ray flicked his head to clear the hair out of his eyes. “Man, you should see the pool they got back there. Is beautiful.”

Skooley wiped off some spittle that had accumulated on his chin with the back of his hand and then ran his hand under his armpit to clean it off.

“Anybody see you?” he asked.

“No man, is like I tole you, nobody home. They away. They away for a month, maybe more.”

“You go into the backyard?”

“Yeah, the backyard, the front yard, all over. I even knock on the door. “

“I told you we was gonna wait, check it out first.”

“We did wait, man. You fell asleep, Skools. I got to pee. I walk back over that way, you know, to take a leak. I’m right there so I take a look around. I don’t see nobody. I come back, you still snoring. We got no more beer. I go out to the road, walk up the driveway in case someone home, you know, looking out the window, they don’t see me sneaking around. I walk up to the front door and knock. No one answer. I ring the bell. Nothing. I walk around, yoo-hoo, anyone home? I go into the backyard. Nice pool. It got a cover, but you can still see, you know. Little water fall, hot tub too, man, is beautiful.”

Ray stood there looking at Skooley with a smug, self-satisfied smile and it took every ounce of self-control for Skooley not to sucker punch him. Instead, he beamed back to his best friendly smile.

“Suppose someone answered the door Ray. Suppose there was some old lady in the backyard, you know, laying out by the pool thinking she’s all alone by herself getting a tan, maybe even naked with her titties sticking out. What then, huh?”

“Someone answer the door, I say I looking for work, you know, clean the yard, cut the grass. Not sneaky, real polite. But no one answer. Is like I tole you already, they no home. They go away for like a month. They go every year. My friend, Esmeralda, she say every year, same time, they go away to California, Arizona, someplace like that.”

Skooley rubbed his chin and thought about it. They were there because Ray had heard about this house from one of his beaner girlfriends who cleaned houses. She had told Ray that there were only two people who lived here, an old rich guy along with his wife. She said the guy was loaded, owned a paving and construction company, and had a big motor yacht they kept docked somewhere on the Hudson River. Skooley could see a small backhoe parked on the far side of the house next to some construction debris. It had to be the guy's machine. And his wife was supposedly some sort of famous artist. Esmeralda said that she had her own art studio over the garage and there were expensive paintings hung up all over the house. One room on the main floor she described as being like a gallery in an art museum. She told Ray that their three kids were grown, married and out of the house.

But Skooley was cautious. What kind of dumb ass would just leave a big old house like this setting empty for so long? Guy was rich and he didn't get that way by being a dumb ass. It wouldn't hurt to take their time and look things over. See if anyone was house sitting. Maybe one of his kids decided to stay over for a few days to make sure that everything was locked up good and tight. Shit, maybe this was the year they decided to just stay put and not go to California or Arizona or wherever the hell they went. Maybe right now, this very minute, they were just leaving the local supermarket or their neighbor's house and heading back home. Skooley certainly wasn't afraid of breaking the law, but he didn't either see any need for being reckless.

"C'mon man, let's go check it out, see if we can get in," said Raymundo, and with a flick of his head he started out of the woods toward the house, "I bet they even leave a door open for us Skools. Maybe they got some beer in a big Viking fridge, huh?"

Skooley scratched his chin and thought about it for just a second, then figured what the hell, and followed the little Mexican from Guatemala into the yard.