

# Chapter One

He gradually opened his eyes. It was dark. He couldn't see his surroundings any more than a few feet away. Beyond that, only hazy images and only when he squinted. He was on a concrete floor, stretched out on his back, his shoulders against the wall, forcing his head forward and against his chest. His hands rested on either side of him but were chained to the wall at chest level—if he were standing up, that is. He tried to move them; they had blood flow and obeyed his command but were restrained by the weight of the iron around his wrists. He could stand up but couldn't go too far away from the wall. He vaguely remembered being at a public gathering with his friend Steve when an explosion had gone off nearby. What had happened? He didn't know. He did recall feeling a slight sensation—as if a bee had stung him—on the back of his neck and the force of two arms grabbing him from behind. He must have been injected with some kind of drug that had put him out until now.

He had no idea how long he had been unconscious. He turned his left hand, bringing his watch into view. The long hand was on the two, and the small hand had dragged itself to a little after eleven, almost as if ashamed of its slow speed. The red hand, proud of its athletic abilities, kept taking small jumps, indifferent to what was happening outside of its prison cell of plastic casing, just trying to help the other hands keep up with their movements. It was ten minutes past eleven—was it morning or night? Where was he? Who was responsible for his abduction? And why? He had no answers. He could hear a slight rattling of sorts above the ceiling over his head, telling him that there must be people on the second level of his prison cell. He could not see any staircase, but after looking up, he noticed a faint image of a folded ladder close by positioned flush against an access door on the ceiling secured by a rope. *'That must be the way in and out of this grave,'* he thought. If so, he figured he could not be in a basement of a house; most likely, it was an underground bunker tucked away somewhere.

He then glanced around the room, also noticing a table rather close by on his left side. On it were tools he could not see clearly enough to identify their function, though a few showed well enough to indicate they'd been placed there for the purpose of inflicting torture. Hanging on the wall on top of the table were electrical wires, most likely used to channel high-voltage electricity through a prisoner's body. On the table, he also noticed a phone, wallet, and gun. Next to that table sat an armchair adorned with leather straps—surely meant to secure someone in place. His mind got to work. If he could move the chair under the ladder, he could surely stand on it and then jump high enough to reach the rope and bring down the ladder. Though that brought another concern to mind: What might be waiting for him up above? Well, no point in “hanging around” waiting to be tortured. He would just have to work it out when he got up there. But not with his hands chained to the wall.

The rattling above had stopped. Was he alone now? Or perhaps whoever had been roaming the floor above him had settled down or gone to sleep. His mind was just going in circles now. First order of business: break free of his shackles. The chains had enough slack for him to twist his body around without difficulty. He pulled himself up, then turned to examine the wall. Solid concrete. The chains were each secured by a hook, which was embedded in the concrete. He might be able to chip away the concrete around the hooks and free the chains if he could put his hands on some of those tools sitting on the table.

Suddenly, he heard the screeching of the access door being opened. Realizing it might be wise to seem unconscious, he twisted around and slumped in the same position as before, head bowed to his chest, remaining still while the ladder came down. He heard footsteps; the way they staggered told him that two men had joined him in his cell. The sudden red that flashed against his eyelids signaled that a light had been turned on. He could also hear some movements upstairs again, indicating that the two men who had come down were not the only ones around. One of the men came close, slapped him on both cheeks, then grabbed his hair and pulled his head up. Alexander kept his eyes closed, though it did not shut out the man's rank breath as he leaned close to peer into his face. After

a few seconds, the man forcefully pushed Alexander's head back down.

"He is still out. How much anesthetics did you shoot in him?" the nearest man asked with a deep, gruff voice, seeming surprised.

"I was in a hurry. I may have given him a little more than I should have. I don't know...." The second man chuckled, his voice slightly more refined, eyes on the limp, slumped body. "But I don't think any amount would've been too much for a man of his strength. He almost knocked me down with the needle in his neck." He turned to his friend. "Why are we pussyfooting around anyway? Why don't we finish him now?"

"What a stupid thing to say, Chuck." The first man flashed his companion a contemptuous look. "If the boss wanted him dead, he would have detonated the bomb a little closer to him, and we would not be here talking about anesthetics, would we?" He faced the seemingly unconscious prisoner. "Well, I guess you'll have to wait until we come back," he mused. "We'll talk to you in the morning. You won't go anywhere, will you?" He locked his eyes with Chuck's. "I wish we had known that both targets were there together.... We'd have had some other guys with us so that we could've brought his friend here too." He paused for a beat. "The captain was already down anyway, and it would've been easy to let them enjoy each other's company," he chuckled.

"What makes you think that the captain was a target too?" Chuck wondered.

"I am sure he is part of the plan, and we'll have to bring him here at some point anyway," the first man replied. "Not only the captain but the other two schmucks also." He shut his mouth and pondered for a moment. "The boss wants all four of them together when he ends their miserable lives. I overheard him talking about it." He nodded to himself. "Martin and Dillan are staking out another of them right now."

Alexander was alarmed that some of his old enemies might have resurfaced. The image of Marco Santory and their final grapple at the construction site popped into his mind.

His abrupt distraction from his current ordeal came quickly to an end when he heard footsteps retreating—they must be heading away

from him. So, he cracked his eyes open. His blue eyes shined. He pulled his head up slightly to see if he could recognize them. Their backs were toward him. *'Shucks, looking at their behinds doesn't help.'* In any case, he was relieved that he could now see the room's content more clearly. Quickly, he scanned the entire room before the men turned off the light and climbed back up the ladder. As soon as both men were out of sight, the ladder was pulled up, and the access door shut.

The dialogue between the two men had not provided any clues other than revealing that Steve, Andy, and Jose were also targets of his captor's boss. It was apparent that the pair who had visited him was not in charge, and the one answering to the name "Chuck" knew even less. The important part of what he had heard was the fact that he had until morning to escape. Until morning! Then it must be night now—a little past 11 p.m. He figured he'd have five or six hours to get away.

He got up, moved closer to the table, and stretched his right leg in that direction, but he could not quite reach the table's legs. He lay on the floor and inched forward as much as he could to see if his feet could reach under the table's side stretcher or behind its nearest leg. No use. He still could not reach it. He only needed a few more inches. He pushed his body even closer to the table, extending his arms above his head and behind him until he felt the pain of iron around his wrists and had to stop. The tip of his shoe now touched the side of the table's round leg of the table. He needed it to extend behind the leg so he could pull it toward himself and not push it further away toward the wall. He still needed to get closer, maybe another inch. He pulled back and stood up. He bent his left leg up, standing on his right leg and resting his back against the wall. Slowly, he took his shoe off, then put his left leg back down on the floor. He put his leg back down on the floor and bent the right leg up, pushing the right shoe into the opening of the shoe in his hand. It went in halfway. He pushed harder to secure the left shoe in the right one. He then straightened his leg back down and hit the tip of the doubled-up shoe to the floor, testing to make sure the inserted shoe was secure and would not slip out at the pressure that the table's resistance would impose. He now had the extra reach that he needed. He lay down

again and pushed his body back toward the table. Now, he was able to put the tip of his doubled-up shoes behind the leg of the table and pull it. The table cooperated—swiveling on the floor a bit, moving its targeted leg slightly closer to him, providing more surface on his shoe to move behind it and grab it tighter. Finally, the table started sliding toward him. He kept pulling until the table was close enough for him to grab its leg with his left hand and pull it until it touched his body. He got up, undoubled his shoes, and put the left shoe back on his left foot. He quickly inspected the many items on the table, then immediately locked eyes on what he thought would serve his purpose—a Heretics Fork, a claw hammer, a tactical axe, and a large, thick nail.

He gripped the claw hammer and cautiously started to chip away the cement around the left hook embedded in the wall—pausing after each strike and then glancing up and listening for any stirring above in reaction to the sound from below. After a few chips of cement fell to the floor, he grabbed the nail, tore off the lapel from his jacket, and wrapped it around the head of the nail to dampen the sound of the strikes by the hammer. He then placed the nail inside the indentations that the hammer had created in the cement and started hammering the nail again, pausing in between the strikes and listening for any disturbances upstairs. All quiet. He continued, sometimes using the Heretics Fork to force out the chipped pieces of cement from around the hook, while at other times, using his fingers to clean out the cement inside the cavity created around the hook and then blowing out the remaining debris.

Finally, he was able to pull one hook from the wall and free his right hand. He glanced at his watch again. Almost 1:30 a.m. If he were lucky, he could free his left hand from the wall by 3 a.m. Realizing he couldn't afford to waste time, he quickly started working on the other hook. It was 2:45 a.m. when he liberated his left hand from the wall. The chains—hooks still attached—dangled down from both of his wrists and jangled as he brushed off cement dust from his clothes. He immediately ran toward the chair, dragging the hooks on the floor behind him. He tried to pick up the chair. *'Wow! So heavy! Made of steel.'* He dragged the chair until it was under the ladder, stood on it, and then jumped to grab the rope. He needed to jump higher. He tried

again. No success. He stood on the chair again. *'I wonder if it could hold my weight if I climb on one of its arms?'* Never mind, he had to try it anyway. He tucked the hooks under his sleeves and cautiously stood on the chair's right arm. *'Good, this should do it.'* He bent his knees, giving his body momentum by pushing his feet hard against the chair's arm. He jumped once more. The chair tumbled down, and his right hand grabbed the rope. The floor rose to meet his feet. He hit the floor, causing his body to bend slightly, but he didn't fall. Immediately, he stood up straight, pulled the rope down, and watched the ladder come down slowly.

He went back to the table and took the gun. At first glance, he recognized his CZ P-10 C, but the mag was emptied—unusable. He holstered it, deciding to arm himself the old-fashioned way. He picked up the axe and the hammer, sliding their handles under his belt. He also picked up the wallet and glanced inside. It was his, and noting that any money he had in it was gone, twitched the corner of his lips. He put it in his left pants pocket, and then he grabbed the phone—also his. He turned it on. *'Thank god, it is working, but no reception.'* He decided to wait until he was out of that grave and on the surface before trying to get a signal. First, however, he needed to find out where he actually was. Sliding the phone into his jacket's right-side pocket, he returned to the ladder and slowly and warily started to climb up until he was able to reach the access door. He pushed it up. It felt heavy; something was on top of it. He forced it to open a crack and peeked out.

It was dark, but he could tell that the access door had opened into an outdoor area, and the weight on top of it was from a large tree branch. He pushed the door open enough to crawl out. At first glance, he caught the sight of an RV parked nearby. Daylight was attempting to force the darkness away, and a light flickered from behind the RV. Bending down and holding the hooks in his hands, he rushed to the RV and looked through the windows. The interior was too dark for him to see anything. He knocked with one hand; the other held the axe. No answer. Pushing his back against the RV, he inched behind it and noticed that the light came from a shack about four or five hundred yards away. Quietly, he ran toward the shack, watchful of a dirt road on his right that ended in a circle near the RV on one side

and extended beyond his sight on the other, indicating it to be the way in and out of the property. He then hid under the window and craned his neck to look inside. Two guys were lying in beds positioned on either side of the small room.

Confident that he could handle the occupants of the shed, Alexander moved to the door and tried the knob. The door cracked open. He pulled back a little, wrapped the chain around his right hand, tucked the hook under his sleeve, and closed his fingers, making an iron fist. He repeated those motions with his left hand, making another iron fist. He then kicked the door open and rushed in. The man on his right side jumped out of his bed first, and his head jerked back immediately after his chin met with Alexander's right fist moving in an uppercut motion. The hook came off from under his sleeve and tumbled to the floor. The man who'd met Alexander's fist with his face fell back into his bed and lost consciousness. The second man, who had just been awakened, charged just as Alexander picked up the fallen hook with his left hand. Noticing the threat from his left side, Alexander twisted his right hand, immediately pulling the axe from his belt and putting the edge of it against the man's throat, halting his attack. "I wouldn't move if I were you," he threatened. "Where's your gun?"

The blood had rushed out of the man's face, and his black eyes seemed to be trying to pop out of their sockets. He was a short man in his thirties, with thin and coarse black hair on his head and a few hairs on the top of his upper lip that resembled those of a porcupine. "No... No gun," he said with a very heavy Mexican accent.

Alexander glanced at the tables beside the beds, checking for weapons. He then let the hook go from his left hand and, while holding the axe in a threatening position, used his left hand to check under the pillows of both beds and then do a cursory brush of the bed coverings to make sure there were no guns hidden under the spreads.

"Go on the other side and sit next to your friend," Alexander demanded so he could watch both men at the same time. The man fearfully rushed sideways to the other side and sat on his unconscious friend's bed.

Alexander put the axe back in his belt but pulled his gun out to encourage the man's continued cooperation, figuring that the fearful

Mexican would not suspect that the gun was not loaded and no threat to him. "Okay, who are you, and where's this place?" He pointed his gun against the man's face.

"Me, Juan...and me amigo, Miguel..." He pointed at the other man. "We... work this farm. This town, Simi Valley," the scared Mexican responded, eyes locked on the gun.

"Simi Valley! Who lives in that RV?" Alexander pointed in the general direction of the RV outside.

"No, no live. Boss come maybe."

"You have the key to it?"

"No... No key." Juan shook his head.

"Who is 'Boss?' Who owns this farm?" Alexander moved the gun a little closer.

"Me don't know. Boss Mister Luis."

"You have a car?"

"No... No car." The Mexican fearfully shook his head.

"How far is this place from town?" Alexander withdrew the gun and holstered it, realizing that these guys were harmless and knew nothing about what was going on in the RV or the hidden torture room.

Just then, Miguel gained consciousness and started moaning. He was holding his chin and looking frightened. A trickle of blood reddening the corner of his mouth indicated the power of Alexander's punch. Looking at his assailant, he bent his knees, pulling his legs up and resting his feet on the bed. He then moved and pulled his shoulders up, pushing himself against the wall as if expecting another hit.

Juan looked at his friend, grimacing. He then turned to Alexander, responding to his question. "Five meenots," he said and gestured in the left direction of the dirt road ending near the RV.

"Okay, thanks." Alexander then turned to Miguel. "Sorry if I hurt you." He held the end of the chain with his right hand, put his right index finger on his forehead in a salute, and then ran out and got lost in the dark.

The other side of the dirt road ended on a paved road with a mailbox indicating the farm's address: 8940. When he reached the paved road, he looked both ways and noticed some of the town's



lights on the right and the lights of a coffee shop, which seemed to be open for business. He ran in that direction until he found himself on the opposite side of the street, across from Road Side Eats—the name of the coffee shop. He noted the road signs positioned at the crux of the intersection next to the coffee shop: Kuehner and Mount Sinai drives. He didn't think he should go inside the coffee shop, even though he was extremely thirsty and needed a drink. That would be the first place the enemy would look once they realized he'd escaped. The chains he was carrying also had a deterrent effect on him showing up in public. He decided to return to the RV and wait to see if he could find out more about his kidnappers. Before turning back, he pulled out his phone. He had reception. He smiled a little and called Steve. He needed some firepower. He also had to warn him of the danger that awaited him.