



CHAPTER 1

*O*ctober 2, 2012.

I was on a SWAT call last night. An armed man held his girlfriend hostage for hours before turning the gun on himself and pulling the trigger. Around seven o'clock in the morning, I'm driving home exhausted, attempting to restore myself by taking notice of what was otherwise a typical morning in Newport Beach—the beauty of a clear sky reflects in the glassy Pacific, the calm anticipation of the day in the faces of people out for a morning jog or sipping fresh coffee. My head is clear, and as I pull into my driveway, I'm ready for a nap.

Just as I've fallen asleep, I hear the phone ringing. It's my sergeant on the other end of the line. I have to go back out. There will be no sleep today.

As it turned out, there was no sleep for the next two years.

Early this morning, 137 miles away from the crisp coastal air, Kern County Sheriff's Deputy Steve Williams was driving alone on State Route 14 in the middle of the Mojave Desert. He was on his way to work when he came upon Mary Barnes, a Newport Beach resident. Mary was walking along the road, looking like a bloody mess, wearing pajamas, wrists bound and holding a knife. She looked frantic. Something was majorly wrong with this picture. So Deputy Williams pulls over and starts to untangle what exactly has happened.

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Mary Barnes is a fifty-three-year-old white female, five feet six inches, and 125 pounds. A bit of a drifter, Mary was single for a long time before meeting and dating William "Bill" Bannon in Florida. She didn't have a clear life direction, was struggling financially, and became enamored with the idea of the Newport Beach lifestyle that Bill represented. So she began working for her boyfriend, Bill, selling timeshares,

and moving across the country to live with him and his twenty-eight-year-old roommate, Michael.

Their four-bedroom house, a block from the beach, is everything Mary could have hoped for in relocating to the West Coast. She doesn't have any friends or family in the area, but that's okay—she's optimistic, romantic, enamored, and hopeful. Mary has fallen in love with her new life. She has no idea there might be a dark side to the men she moved in with, and she knows nothing of their marijuana empire being grown right under her nose.

Newport is still fresh and exciting to her. According to Mary, October 1, 2012, was a normal Monday night in her new life. Bill was out of town, which was not unusual. Mary hadn't seen much of Michael that day, but come to think of it, she hadn't seen much of Michael at all. Exhausted from unpacking, Mary fell asleep in her room somewhat early. When Michael came home, he fell asleep watching television on the couch on the second floor.

At 2:30 a.m., their peaceful night quickly turns into their worst nightmare.

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Michael Simonian is a twenty-eight-year-old white male, five foot seven, 175 pounds. You would have no idea how wealthy Michael is by looking at him. And I mean that in a good way. He's an out-of-shape marijuana enthusiast with an entrepreneurial mindset who likes to take care of his family and friends. Picture a younger Zach Galifianakis, a slightly unkempt teddy bear that you can't help but love—oh, and makes lots of money. He has a girlfriend that is probably out of his league and two loving parents. He stays at his parents' sometimes, his girlfriend's sometimes, and rents a few rooms off-record around Orange County. He drives an older model Toyota—nothing flashy.

Michael grew up in the area. He knows how to grow a weed business. He makes about \$150,000 a month and is constantly reinvesting his cash in marijuana equipment or new grows. He realizes he's being used here and there and often finds himself footing the bill for friends. He's a charming teddy bear of a people-pleaser. Even though some have tried to take advantage of his niceness, he never puts himself in a position to lose out financially.

Michael can't deposit his money from his medical marijuana business in a bank because, even though the business is legal in California, all marijuana is illegal at the federal level, so he operates his life in

cash. Michael originally met his roommate Bill at a poker party. He likes gambling, likes Bill, and decides to rent a room from him. Why? Bill is good with a cash-only, under-the-table deal that doesn't put anything in Michael's name. Bill gets some extra money, and Michael gets somewhat of his own space when needed. It's a win-win.

* * *

The Attack

When we sort through Mary and Michael's initial interviews, we learn that Mary wakes up to a cold metal barrel of a gun on the back of her neck. A masked man has broken into their home. He blindfolds her and says, "This is not about you." The assailant tapes her mouth shut, zip-ties her hands behind her back, and then zip-ties her ankles together. As she's carried downstairs, she hears her roommate Michael fighting for his life. She is terrified. She feels helpless. She *is* helpless, actually. She can't move or speak or scream. She can't see what's happening. Full of innocence, having no experience with the dark side of life, she has no idea the terror she's about to endure.

On the second floor, another masked suspect wearing gloves strikes Michael in the face with the butt of a

shotgun. Michael and the intruder struggle violently over the shotgun. The suspect begins hitting and ruthlessly kicking Michael, who is still resisting and putting up a good fight. Then a person-sized shadow on the wall increases in size as a second intruder enters the room. Michael's heart sinks. This is starting to feel impossible.

Suspect number two strangles Michael from behind. Michael struggles and still attempts to fight off his attackers, but as he begins to lose air, he feels weak and starts to faint. During the attack, the intruders are asking Michael—and only Michael, never Mary—one question:

Where's the million dollars?

Michael is mystified. He says he has \$2000 in a sock in a drawer in the room. They can have it. But that's not what the attackers want. They are looking specifically for one million dollars, and they are not taking anything less.

Michael gives in to his attackers. He's lying limp on the floor when they blindfold him and zip-tie his hands and feet together, just like they did to Mary. They duct tape his mouth closed.

Michael is pulled feet first down the stairs, his head hitting every step. Mary hears all of this and is

utterly baffled. Neither Michael nor Mary know who the intruders are or why they are being targeted—maybe they got the wrong house? Neither of them has a million dollars. *Does Bill?*

The sound of a vehicle pulling up creates new panic for the victims. Reality sets in—this is not a robbery; it's a kidnapping. The two masked men shove their human cargo in the back of the vehicle and get in the back with them. A third criminal is driving.

Michael is getting thrashed and thrown around in the back of the vehicle while being beaten. They tell him, “Be good, so you don’t get this girl killed too.” He can feel blood trickling down his face. He’s kicking, moving, flinching, and at times the blindfold slips down enough for him to catch a glimpse of what is happening. In one of these moments, he sees a flash of black and white plastic that he immediately identifies as “panda paper.” In the marijuana business, panda paper is used to reflect the light and enhance the harvest. *Are these guys some kind of hitmen from a marijuana Mafia?*

They drive an interminable amount of time toward some destination—which turns out to be a remote area of the Mojave Desert approximately 100 miles away. Mary is hunched against a wall in the back of the vehicle, hearing the brutal beating. She can feel

slick plastic and cold metal with her hands that are still tied behind her. She is terrified and tries to disappear into the blackness behind her blindfold, tries to close her ears against Michael's horrific screams, tries to hold her breath against the stench of his blood and something else that smells like burning skin.

All the while, Michael is being tortured right next to her. The two thugs take turns maniacally singing: "Where's the million dollars, Michael? Where's the million dollars?"

Where's the million dollars?

* * *

Maybe I won't die, Michael thinks.

From his periodic glimpses of them, the attackers have their masks on the entire time. They call each other nicknames from *Reservoir Dogs*: Pink and Brown. They don't want to be seen or identified. So if the attackers can't be identified, Michael thinks it's possible they won't be killed.

But for Mary, the fear of death creeps into her bones. There is no mercy in any of this that Mary can sense. During the drive, she thinks her new roommate is dead for long minutes at a time . . . until he screams from some fresh new torture that Mary

cannot fathom. She molds herself into the shape of the metal corner of the truck.

After one long silence, Michael suddenly reveals that he has \$100,000 in a safety deposit box. It only serves to invite a new round of beating with something that feels like a lead pipe and with curses that they know he buried “it” in the ground. They insist with certainty that they know the million dollars is not in any bank. Still not getting what they want, the bad guys threaten to break bones one at a time—in the bodies of Michael’s parents and girlfriend. It’s clear they’ve been watching Michael and his loved ones.

For Michael, the physical and mental brutality throughout the drive exceeds the bounds of hell, both real and imagined. For Mary, the insanity of the experience brings on anger fueled by fear.

The car slows down and makes a turn. Mary hears the crunch of gravel underneath the tires. Something inside her fiercely determines it’s not over. She decides that she doesn’t want to die. Not like this. Not tonight.

The door of the car opens. Still bound and gagged, Mary and Michael are dragged onto the cold desert floor and laid out on their backs. From the sounds of Michael’s jagged breathing patterns, Mary senses they are about two feet apart.

Michael jerks violently away from the attacker, who is all of a sudden right next to his face. In a graveled voice, the attacker whispers: “This is your last chance, you poor bastard. Where is the million dollars?” Michael, exhausted and broken, solemnly whispers back: “There is . . . no . . . million dollars.”

That’s when things get worse.

Mary hears the *glug glug glug* of something being poured, splashing over her roommate. *Is it gasoline? Are they going to set him on fire? Are they going to set us both on fire?* The smell is overwhelming. A toxic chemical is permeating the dark morning air. It’s not gasoline, she realizes. Michael is being doused in bleach.

One of the attackers pulls down Michael’s pants and puts his foot on Michael’s chest, while the other one places a zip tie around Michael’s penis and scrotum. One of them takes a serrated knife and starts sawing Michael’s penis off while psychotically singing, “And back and forth, and back and forth.” The cutting lasts forty-five seconds to one minute. After his penis is cut off, Michael is screaming and writhing in agony. He’s coughing, choking on his own spit, and gasping in pain.

One of the attackers leans over Mary and touches her with the knife they just used. What are they going to do to her? Fear floods every cell in her body. She

feels incredibly vulnerable—no one knows where she is or that anything is wrong. No one can hear her if she tries to scream. She can't hear any sound from Michael anymore. She doesn't know if he is dead or alive.

“It's your lucky day,” one of the attackers says. “If you can find the knife, you can save yourself.” The kidnapper drops the knife, and the three of them drive away as the sun's first rays begin to peek into the cold, dark morning.

Left for dead, Mary is in shock. She uses her knees to push her blindfold up enough to where she can see. Still bound, she manages to find the knife tangled up in a cactus. *It's a miracle.* She cuts her leg straps and stands up. She attempts to cut her wrist straps but can't because of the swelling.

Next, she tries to cut Michael's zip ties, but due to the inflammation and bleeding, she isn't able to free him at all. *Will the attackers be coming back? Are they watching her now? What just happened?* She takes the gag out of his mouth. Michael takes a deep breath and whispers, “That feels so much better.” He's alive. *For now, anyway.*

* * *

It's a normal Tuesday morning for Sergeant Steve Williams—until it's not. He's had enough sleep, his coffee tastes great, and the morning radio show host is playing a decent mix of music and news. It has the makings of a perfect day in Kern County. But Sergeant Williams is a seasoned deputy, and his sixth sense is always alert. He knows what goes up must come down—that perfect mornings don't always turn into perfect days.

*Throughout this story, you'll see
several "God moments" take place.
From brilliant investigative decisions,
being at the right place at the right
time, finding that perfect piece of
evidence, making a timely and life-
changing phone call, to having the
right cop at the right time.*

*This is one of those moments.
Right cop . . . at the right time.*

Out in his peripheral vision, Sergeant Williams sees a woman stumbling around on the shoulder of the highway. He notices her hands are tied. She is in pajamas, seems exhausted, and is bleeding. She's holding a knife. *What the hell?*

Sergeant Williams pulls over to the side of the road. He has no idea the magnitude of this moment. As

seasoned as he is in picking up on clues and working cases, Steve could not anticipate the heinousness of the story he is about to hear.

As a professional, his first step is to take pictures of her bound hands to document the situation. A younger, less experienced cop would have unbound her, cut her ties, and tried to get her medical treatment immediately. But Williams takes all the proper precautions. He looks at the situation from an investigative standpoint and safeguards all evidence.

Officer Williams: How long have you been out here?

Mary: I guess it was just before sunrise. Officer, my friend and I were kidnapped in Newport Beach. They threw us in a van. It happened so fast.

Officer Williams: What's his name?

Mary: Michael. He's in the desert, up the hill in the mountains; we need to save him. He needs help badly. I'm afraid he might not make it. Please, hurry.

Once the initial evidence is collected properly, Sergeant Williams calls for backup and medical support. Mary collapses into the patrol car with him and directs them as best she can. Her body has gone into shock, and she's shaking while she's trying to show Williams where to go. She has no idea if the attackers are coming back, nor if Michael has died

alone out there. The ache of knowing she could have saved Michael is creeping into her consciousness. A new sense of urgency washes over her. They drive off-road to a gate, then a gulley, and finally reach the abandoned Golden Queen Mine.

Historically, much treasure is buried in the Soledad Mountains and the Mojave Mining District. The Golden Queen Mining Company produced over \$10 million in gold and silver from 1894 to 1942. The area isn't exactly known for being crime-free. In fact, quite the opposite—the mine has attracted shady people wanting to strike it rich for over 100 years.

Sergeant Williams helps Mary out of the car, and they start walking to find Michael. It's 8:00 a.m. The mountains are back and to the right as they approach the crime scene. The sun is carrying on with the business of rising as though nothing has happened. A new day is dawning anyway.

As they walk further, the stench of bleach and blood becomes overpowering. They are definitely going in the right direction. Before they see Michael, they hear him groaning. This is good news. It means he's still alive. There's still a chance that he will make it.

* * *

I'm the lead detective when the call from Williams comes into the station: "We have two people from Newport who were kidnapped and left for dead in an abandoned gold mine." This situation is what has pulled me out of my bed and back into the field. From Williams's brief outline of the crime, neither Michael nor Mary can identify their kidnappers. Our job is to figure out who has done this and why. There are no leads, no ideas—there is nowhere to start. I'm briefly updated and gather my thoughts as I head to the crime scene at the house.

The awareness of the brutality comes into focus as the officers on-site in the desert begin to look for Michael's severed penis. If they can find it, they can reattach it, but unfortunately, it is nowhere to be found. The attackers had taken it with them purposely to ensure a lifetime of suffering. I can only imagine the devastation this will cause if Michael survives.

On the morning of October 2, 2012, we sent Detectives Freeman and Carpentieri, some of our best detectives, to interview Michael and Mary at the hospital while others research the victims' histories. We want to know their phone numbers, their relatives, their friends, and anything we can find in our databases about Michael and Mary. Our team, haggard from the night before, is fixated on

reviewing video surveillance from local businesses and city parking lots. They are searching every single license plate in a four-block radius as we try to put together some of the puzzle pieces of this heinous crime. We are looking for something, anything, as a starting point to unravel this case.

I know I need to start the investigation from the inside out. That's why I'm starting at the original scene of the crime. It's important for me to walk through the house where Mary and Michael were kidnapped with crime scene investigators (CSI) to pick up on clues and get some initial data.

Mary's suitcases are full of clothes, open on the floor as I survey the crime scene. *She was still getting settled in at the time of the kidnapping.* I'm making notes as I do a walkthrough of the house:

- I notice Bill's car is in the garage, which is located off the alley.
- I notice the house doesn't look ransacked.
- It looks well kept.
- Expensive jewelry is still present.
- There's a small safe that can easily be carried, left on scene.

- There is no damage to the door, no damage to the windows, the front door and side door are locked, and the garage is closed.

I'm thinking: *This is someone familiar to them. This is someone familiar with the house. They locked up as they left.* Did they have the keys? Did they get the keys from Michael or Mary? Where was the car parked if there was already a car in the garage? It's not big enough for two cars . . . if a suspect vehicle was parked in the alley, how come nobody saw it? Where are the cameras? Why did they hide bloody sheets on the third floor? Who's lying about not knowing these guys? Is Michael lying? Mary? Someone had to have seen something . . .

As a next step, I want to meet with Sergeant Williams, and we plan to meet in his office to review their evidence. It's brisk on my drive over to Kern County. I'm about 100 miles north of Los Angeles, driving through farmland. Even though we're just west of palm trees and paradise, the county seat has one of the highest crime rates in the United States, with a violent crime rate of one in every twenty-one residents. This area is also known for its riches in gold, oil, and agriculture—which includes carrots, potatoes, lettuce, and watermelon. And, of course, the booming marijuana empires.

The Kern County sheriff's deputies give me great data immediately. We are trying to get as much evidence as we can, as quickly as possible. They show me photographs and footage of how the victims were found and give me everything they have. Nothing is held back. I'm impressed and pleased they have documented everything so well, but it's still an empty case. The evidence doesn't give me a direction.

* * *

At the hospital, Mary and Michael are beginning the slow process of physical and emotional recovery. Mary is unstable in her ability to recall information. We don't want to cloud things for her further by sending a male detective to question her, so we make sure a female detective is tending to Mary throughout the process. But she is not opening up to us yet, and she is not communicating well.

I go into Michael's hospital room. It's as bad as I think. His shoulder and wrist are severely injured. He's been beaten, torched, mutilated, bleached, and—blindsided. The trauma is very fresh. He's confused, angry, and in a lot of pain. In his mind, he has no enemies. He has no idea who could have done this to him. He doesn't know anyone capable of this level of cruelty. But I know better.

The culprit has got to be someone who knows him, someone who has been watching him, and someone who knows exactly how much money he has.

I just need to break some ground with him so that he can trust me.

There is a five-hour delay between the first interview he gave Detective Carpentieri and the time I arrive. There's a sterile busyness in Michael's room. He's being asked a lot of questions between treatments, new IV bags, and fresh dressings on his wounds. I know he's already been through so much, and I hate feeling like I'm bugging him.

My main goal in meeting with Michael today is to establish trust, that I'm working for him. I want him to know, like, and trust me so we can work together to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible. I don't want to ask him a bunch of additional questions right now. I'm just here, showing my face as someone on his side. But instead of talking openly, he's argumentative. Michael insists that he has no idea how this could have happened. He wants me to stop asking him questions and start finding his attacker. It's killing me that I'm not getting through to him.

The attitude Michael is giving me is understandable. After all, he's working in a very "gray" profession that doesn't have the best rapport with cops. Sure, selling medical marijuana in dispensaries in California is legal in 2012, but he also knows that I know that he's buying illegally to survive as a company. I remind him I'm not looking to charge him with anything, in any way, shape, or form, nor will I be charging him in the future. I'm only here to try and find who did this to him so that justice can be served. We want to protect him, his family, and the community from the monsters who did this.

But throughout our conversation, Michael is angry. It's hard for him to remember the details, and he's getting more and more combative. I remind him I'm trying to shine the light on any past experiences, associates, or arguments he may have had.

Michael finally mentions Bill, the owner of the house where he was attacked. He met Bill during a high-stakes poker party in an affluent community. A buy-in would cost each player \$25k to \$100k on any given night. They would bring in cocktail waitresses, have a massage therapist rubbing their backs while they were playing, and there would be large, expensive Vegas-style tables, lots of food, and lots of drinking.

While Michael is telling me this, I remember that we had a SWAT call to one of the poker parties where Bill was playing. At that party, three armed males broke into the house, beat people up, and robbed them. One escaped, but we caught the other two. We rescued the homeowner, and everyone else made it out safe. This was about a year ago.

I decide to keep the conversation brief, knowing I'm not getting any different information than the detectives obtained earlier. I tell him I'm going to be relentless for him. I need to convince him that what he has endured is not random. There's a reason behind this brutality. I tell him it's my job to figure out who did this to him—and to put an end to it.

Everyone is a potential suspect, and everyone is a potential victim. I need to talk to Michael's parents and girlfriend. They have to know something that will be helpful in breaking this case. So at the end of our interview, I ask Michael for a list of his family and friends that I can interview. I ask him to give them a heads up that I'll be calling. Even in homicides, witnesses and families are reluctant to talk to police. People get really nervous and hesitant with law enforcement. I need their full cooperation, and that begins with his trust.

I am confident the flow of truth will come out slowly, drip by drip. We have to be persistent and patient.

Michael's parents are open to talking to me. I get the feeling right away his parents are not involved in the crime. They are worried they could be a potential target. I begin to wonder: Does the dad owe someone money, or is he in trouble with someone who has retaliated and hurt Michael? I promise Michael's mom that we aren't going to drop the ball on this. I tell her as much as I can without scaring her, and I assure her we will find out who did this and put them in jail. I give her my personal cell phone number and allow her to call or text me anytime.

There's no immediate evidence against the parents, and there's no vibe or gut feeling I get when I'm around them. So I help Michael's dad set up private armed security at their home and facilitate Michael's girlfriend staying at a hotel with some friends in Palm Springs. We do this to continue to push the "trust door" open wider, but I'm getting nowhere fast.

I leave the hospital with no definitive information. No ideas. No leads.

Even though I'm growing frustrated, I fully trust our team. All hands are on deck. We have over a dozen experienced detectives working the case, collecting statements, researching data, and watching

surveillance tapes. Everyone is investigating every possible lead, and this means our resources are draining quickly.

Back on the road, I'm tired. Our entire team is ragged, especially the SWAT team that has been working for three days straight with me. I update my wife and check in on the kids. Everything is okay at home. I continue sorting through possibilities for what could have happened in my mind, filtering all of the data that has come in today. *Who did this, and why? Where are they now? When will they strike again?* I'm going home, and I'm going to review the evidence all night.