

# CHAPTER ONE

Jake froze, aware of a huge tiger in front of him just to his left. It was staring directly at him, more with curiosity than aggression. But, it was a damned tiger, no more than about twenty-five feet away, a distance it could easily close before Jake could take more than two or three steps.

His heart was pounding and panic gripped him. What could he do? If he moved, he was a dead man. If he didn't move, he would be a dead man as soon as the tiger decided to pounce.

Jake's head was fuzzy. Where the hell was he? He remembered being cold—bone-chillingly cold—not long ago. Other than that, nothing was registering. It was like coming out of anesthesia.

He turned his head slowly without losing sight of the tiger and saw he was surrounded by lush greenery. Light filtered through the trees that towered over his head. The underbrush was incredibly dense. *Nothing cold about this place*, he thought. *Why am I—no, that's not right. Why was I cold?* He realized he was on a raised walkway. Below where he was standing, a pond was nearly obscured by thick vegetation. He could hear water streaming into it from an unseen source. It would be pretty if it weren't for the tiger . . .

Jake's mind raced, trying to remember anything that would give him a clue as to where he was and why a tiger was there with him.

Yet there *was* something strangely familiar about this place. Then, it hit him! It reminded him of the garden conservatory at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville. He had been there for a meeting once or twice and had gone back at Christmas when they lit the trees with millions of tiny white lights. Jake had admired how it had been landscaped to transport guests to a beautiful and peaceful Victorian garden. If that's where he was, how did he get there? None of this made any sense! And they sure as hell didn't have tigers at the Opryland Hotel.

Jake needed help, but he didn't see anyone around him. He didn't want to chance shouting for someone, because he didn't want to excite the tiger — which was still staring at him.

He reached for his phone in his jeans pocket, slowly raised it, and punched 911.

"911. What's your emergency?"

Jake croaked into the phone. "Tiger. There's a tiger staring at me. It's only a few feet away and there is nothing to keep it from attacking. Please send help. I'm not sure where I am."

He realized he could look at his phone and check to see exactly where he was, but the operator's comment stopped him.

"There's no one available to help you now. If the tiger hasn't attacked you yet, maybe it's not hungry. Figure it out."

The line went dead.

He pulled the phone away from his ear and gaped at it in disbelief. This wasn't happening! Jake could hear his blood rushing in his ears as he felt himself drowning in his panic.

The sound of trickling water grew louder, as if it wanted his attention, and a gentle breeze brushed his face. Songbirds were chirping in the distance, and a ray of light shined into his eyes. Mercifully, he felt like he was floating away from the tiger, which was still looking intently at him.

Jake's eyes fluttered as he tried to focus. Early-morning sunlight was drifting into the room, and a breeze carrying the sound of songbirds and a bubbling fountain was wafting in through an open window. Jake's heart was still pounding and his bed was soaked with sweat. Realizing he had been holding his breath, he audibly exhaled, relieved it had only been a dream. No tiger. No trees. No path to . . . where? The path to nowhere again left him with a sinking feeling. He still had absolutely no idea where he was.

Propping himself up on his elbows and trying to shake away the cobwebs, he looked around. His spacious room was comfortably furnished in muted tones with a few splashes of color. The king-sized bed had amazingly soft linens. There was a love seat, a cocktail table, an overstuffed chair, and a side chair. Lamps sat on tables on either side of the bed. Hardwood floors were covered with expensive carpets. The art on the wall was botanical. He wasn't an expert on decor, but Jake thought the room reminded him of colonial America. *At least, he thought, wherever the hell I am, it must be a five-star hotel. This place is impressive.*

The clock on the nightstand read 7:30.

Jack wracked his brain to remember where he was and how he had gotten there. Absolutely nothing. He wondered if he had been drunk the night before. Again, nada.

He needed to pee.

There was a doorway on the right side of his room. From his bed, Jake could see a marble-tiled floor, which he guessed was the bathroom.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and tried to stand. His legs were a bit shaky and he was dizzy. Losing his balance, he fell back and stared at the slowly turning fan in the coffered ceiling.

"You must have really tied one on last night, buddy." Jake

was quietly talking aloud to himself. "Get a grip. You need to remember where you are."

He looked around for his phone, but didn't see it on either nightstand. He did notice the lamps had no cords. *Curious. They must be battery operated, or maybe there's an induction plate under them.*

Jake made a mental note to check out the lamps later, but his bladder was more demanding than his curiosity. He stumbled to the bathroom, gripping furniture on his way for balance.

Spotting the toilet behind an open door at the far end of the bathroom, Jake made his way toward it. He glanced at the mirror over the vanity. What he saw made him stop.

His reflection was trim and muscular, dressed only in his boxer briefs. He looked . . . healthy. He smiled back at himself. He looked good. Still, something was oddly out of place.

Jake again shook his head. "Where *am* I?"

After nature's insistence, Jake looked at himself again as he washed his hands. Then he realized other than his name, Jake Conary, he not only couldn't remember how he got to wherever he was, but he couldn't remember anything else about himself.

A wrapped toothbrush and toothpaste were on the counter next to the sink along with any toiletry items he might need. Just what he would expect in a nice hotel. Maybe he was in a suite at the Opryland Hotel? Jake laughed to himself. Well, he did remember something, didn't he? His name, and for some reason, the hotel.

Feeling a bit steadier on his feet, but more confused, he walked back into the bedroom. He looked again for his phone. It wasn't anywhere to be found. He pulled back the covers, thinking he might have had it with him in his bed. Nothing.

Jake sat down in the overstuffed chair and put his head into his hands, rubbing his eyes with his palms. "Think, dammit!"

"Having a little trouble this morning, Jake?"

Startled, Jake flinched and looked toward the voice.

A tall man, perhaps six foot two, had slipped into the room without Jake hearing. He had short blonde hair and was fit. Jake thought he looked to be in his late thirties or early forties. He was wearing a tailored white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, loose-fitting khaki slacks, and tan loafers. Jake didn't remember ever having seen him before—but Jake wasn't remembering much of anything.

"I'm guessing you may be struggling a bit this morning. My name is Roger. This is my home. I'm honored to have you as my guest. Perhaps you remember meeting me once before?"

Jake looked at Roger blankly and shook his head.

"No worries. I'm afraid you hit your head pretty hard. I'm sure you will recall everything in time, and we're going to do all we can to help you do just that. I know you have a lot of questions, but let's get you some breakfast first. You must be famished."

Jake quickly processed two things. This Roger guy was right—he had no idea who he was—and he was ravenous.

Roger went on. "Don't rush. You'll want to take a shower first. We have all the time in the world to talk. There are clothes in the closet that should be your size. The breakfast room is down the stairs next to the kitchen off the back of the house. I'll send Taylor to show you the way when you're ready. See you in a bit."

Roger turned to leave, but Jake stopped him. "Where *am* I?"

"All in due time, I promise. For now, as I said, you're my guest in my home."

“But where is your home and what day is it?”

“Tuesday. Tennessee.”

“Tennessee! But, not the Opryland Hotel?”

Roger smiled. “No, of course not. As I said, you’re a guest in my home. Now, that’s all until you’ve had a shower and some breakfast.” Roger closed the door softly behind him.

Jake was more confused than ever. He didn’t remember hitting his head. And who the hell was this Roger guy? He seemed pleasant enough, but Jake’s gut told him there was much more to his story. He felt for a lump or a sore spot, not finding one. This just wasn’t adding up, but he was sure it would. He just needed to ask the right questions.

His stomach growled.

“Okay, Roger,” Jake said to the closed door. “Your house, your rules. For now.”

He stood and walked to the shower. Stepping into it, he looked around for faucets that weren’t there. For some reason, he recalled he liked his showers slightly hot. Not scalding, but enough to loosen the tension in his muscles. It wasn’t much; still, remembering anything at this point was a good thing.

Jake noticed a palm-shaped bas-relief in the shower wall and placed his right hand on it. The water came on at exactly the right temperature from multiple jets in the ceiling and walls. “Hmm, must be instant hot. It’s a welcome coincidence that it’s perfect for me.”

As he stood in the spray, Jake remembered his dream. The bone-chilling cold that faded from him. The tiger that didn’t take its eyes off of him. If not the Opryland Hotel, at least Tennessee. But Jake didn’t *think* he lived in Tennessee. How odd was that, not knowing where he lived? Well, probably no odder than anything else this morning. Still, odd. He didn’t know where he belonged, but he sensed it wasn’t here.

With nothing more than a growing list of questions, Jake

scrubbed and shampooed with a soap that smelled lightly of fresh lemon and a leather-and-tobacco-scented hair wash. Finished, he correctly guessed he should again put his hand on the palm symbol on the wall of the shower. As he did, the water stopped, and three wavy lines appeared next to the palm icon. Warm air blew across him from all sides. He laughed—the experience was not unlike an automated car wash.

Jake had also seen a heated towel rack just outside the shower, and he reached for a towel to finish rubbing himself dry before walking back into the bedroom.

Roger had been right; the clothes in the closet were the perfect size for Jake. Everything looked new. No tags, but unworn. A dresser in the closet held the boxer briefs he preferred, as well as undershirts and socks. From the hanging clothes, he chose a tan linen shirt and medium blue slacks. Jake picked up a pair of walnut laced oxfords and looked at the soles. No surprise there. New. What was surprising was there were no brand names in any of the clothing items. Instead, in place of a brand label, Jake found his name. More questions for breakfast.

Jake threw on his clothes, ran a brush through his hair, and without waiting for Taylor—whoever the hell that was—he walked to the door. But as he reached for the handle, he was torn, and pulled his hand away. Was he going to get all the answers to his questions? Did he really want to hear the answers? Without knowing why, he sensed something ominous waiting for him on the other side of the door. But, his hesitation faded and he stood more erect as he instinctively knew one more thing. He wasn't a coward, and he dealt with problems head on. Jake grasped the handle once again and firmly pulled the door open.

Roger had been modest about his “house.” The home was enormous. When Jake stepped into the hall, he felt like he *was* in a hotel. The hallway was roughly eight feet wide, with seven rooms opening off of it before it turned at the end of the hall. Most of the doors were closed, or partially closed. Jake peeked into one whose door was ajar. Like “his” room, it was spacious, perhaps twenty-five by twenty feet, and tastefully decorated. However, unlike the room Jake was in, this one seemed to have a country French theme.

As he was backing out of the doorway, a housekeeper came around the corner. Jake was embarrassed having been caught snooping, and hung his head. “Sorry. I was passing by and thought I heard something. I’m looking for Taylor.”

Lifting his head as he spoke, his eyes widened in surprise. The housekeeper was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen—at least, as far as he could remember. She had dark-brown skin and large, expressive brown eyes. Her hair was closely cropped to her perfectly shaped head. Everything about her was perfectly shaped, as Jake could clearly see by her well-fitted charcoal-grey uniform, which buttoned up the front with a white placket, a slightly scooped neck, short sleeves trimmed in white, and a straight skirt that came to about three inches above the knee. It struck Jake as sort of sexy, like a French-maid outfit, but not as blatant or tacky. However, he also noticed the three-inch heels, which were totally impractical for a housekeeper, but added to the clear message that the uniform was meant to attract attention.

The housekeeper flashed Jake a brilliant smile complete with adorable dimples and perfectly shaped, perfectly white teeth.

“No problem, Mr. Jake.” Jake was flattered that this vision of a woman knew his name. “This is a big house. Easy to get lost, and sounds sometimes fool you in a house this size.” The



housekeeper had what sounded like a Jamaican lilt. "Taylor won't be in this room, but he should be here shortly. I believe Mr. Roger is in the breakfast room. If you don't want to wait for Taylor, just follow the hall around the corner. There is a stairway in the middle that leads to the main floor, where the breakfast room is at the far end of the house. But that way is a little confusing.

"So, there is another wing past that stairway. If you go to the end of the other wing, there is a back stairway that comes out close to the kitchen and breakfast room. Either way will getcha there, but I think it is easier to not get lost if you take the back stairs."

"Right. Thank you very much . . ." Jake let his sentence hang.

"Alice, sir."

"Thank you very much, Miss Alice. Sounds like good advice. I appreciate it." He smiled flirtatiously.

"Welcome, sir, but it's just Alice."

"There's absolutely nothing 'just' about you, Miss Alice. With your permission, I'll call you Miss Alice."

"As you wish, Mr. Jake, sir."

Jake bowed to Alice and she continued on her way. He watched her leave, thinking she looked as inviting from this view as she did coming toward him. He started to walk on, following Alice's directions, then turned to glance back, just as Alice did the same. Both smiled broadly at each other. Jake waved and went to find the back stairs.

Jake rounded the corner and came upon what he assumed was the main stairway. Once again, he was stunned by the size of Roger's mansion. The stairway, which was wider than the upper hallway, curved gently toward the main floor. Jake looked up and figured the upper-floor ceiling heights were twelve feet, and guessed the main-floor ceiling was between

eighteen and twenty. But the total height of the foyer had to be forty feet or more, so there must be yet another floor above where his bedroom was. Who built homes this large?

There was cut glass above the huge foyer to provide natural light, which was supplemented with indirect lighting throughout. The floor of the foyer appeared to be polished marble with a pattern in the center that reminded Jake of a compass rose. At the back of a deep recess along the wide wall at the top of the stairs were two massive doors, behind which Jake guessed might be Roger's suite.

A man in formal livery was nearing the top of the stairs. He somewhat reminded Jake of Cadbury from the *Richie Rich* comics. (How did he remember that when he couldn't remember anything about himself?) Except this "Cadbury," whom Jake guessed was fifty-ish, had more of an olive complexion and looked like he was no stranger to the gym.

"Good morning, Mr. Conary. We had news you were awake. I am so pleased. My name is Taylor. I am responsible for the house and for the staff that serves the house. If there is anything you need, do let me know. Mr. Burr is waiting for you in the breakfast room. May I show you the way?"

"Ah, I assume Mr. Burr is Mr. Roger Burr, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"And is Taylor your first name like Miss Alice, who I just met?"

"Oh, no sir. It is just Taylor."

"So, Taylor is your last name?"

"No, sir. Just Taylor. May I show you to Mr. Burr?"

"I see. No thank you, Taylor. Miss Alice—"

Taylor interrupted. "Alice, sir."

"Yes . . . Alice. Alice suggested I take the back stairs. They're just down this way, right?"

"Yes, sir. If you will please follow me."

Jake smiled a tight smile. "Thank you, Taylor. I think I'm good." With that, he once again made an appreciative scan of the atrium, nodded to a bowing Taylor, and turned to continue down the hall, past another row of bedroom doors, to the back stairs.

Just as Miss Alice had promised, the back stairs dumped Jake out by a butler's pantry between the kitchen and breakfast room. The door to the kitchen swung open. A server dressed similarly to Alice was coming from the kitchen with a massive bowl of fresh fruit. Jake could only briefly see the kitchen, which he assumed would have to be the size of one needed to support an ocean liner because of the enormity of Roger's home, but curiously, the kitchen appeared to be relatively small.

He didn't have time to reflect on his surprise about the kitchen, because the server, Kate, a spectacular redhead with a decidedly Irish accent, told him, "Mr. Roger has changed his mind. He asked me to serve on the verandah. If you will follow me, Mr. Jake."

By now, Jake was getting used to his "celebrity" status and was no longer surprised when he was greeted by name.

Kate led the way to the portico, which could be accessed from either the breakfast room itself or what was a gathering room to the left of the breakfast room. Like Alice before her, Kate was perfectly beautiful. Jake was enjoying listening to her talk and watching her walk. He shook his head and wondered who Roger really was and whether he had surrounded himself with only beautiful women.

When Kate reached the porch, she stepped aside and invited Jake to go before her. Jake smiled admiringly at her, thinking to himself that wherever the hell he was, it was a pretty great place as his mind wandered briefly to not entirely proper thoughts of Kate *and* Alice. But, when he stepped onto

the verandah, he was again surprised. Roger was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he found an elegant, dark-haired woman who appeared to be in her early thirties. She was impeccably dressed in a chic pantsuit with an open back. When the woman turned to greet Jake, he was taken by her soft café au lait skin tone and unusual violet eyes.

"Jake, I am so glad you are awake." She approached him with her hand extended. "I am Maria Burr." Maria's r's rolled slightly. "I have waited so long to meet you. Roger had to step away for a few minutes." To Kate she said, "I will be joining Mr. Roger and Mr. Jake. Please set another place at the table."

Kate nodded, and set down her bowl of fresh fruit. "Of course, ma'am." She hurried away.

Like everything else Jake had seen of the house, with the odd exception of the kitchen, the verandah was expansive, with an ironwood pergola that had been covered with intermingled wisteria and jasmine to provide shade. The flooring was bluestone. Fans were suspended from the pergola to stir the air. The furniture was elegantly casual and inviting, with several groupings designed for guests to cluster and to have comfortable conversations. Breakfast was being set on the table of one of these groupings with a perfect view of the grounds off the back of the home.

Maria wrapped her arm in Jake's and led him over to the aggregate railing around the porch. Although they were on the main floor of the home, the ground sloped away from the rear of the house and there was a lower level below where they were standing. The yard stretched out for what Jake guessed was a hundred yards. After that, there was a walled garden with a beautiful glass solarium. And beyond that were white-washed, rail-fenced fields with horses, cattle, and sheep. In the distance was a large wooded area bordering what Jake assumed was their property.

He remembered his manners, having been somewhat dumbstruck by Maria and the beauty of the estate.

"I'm so sorry, you are Roger's wife, then?"

"Yes, I am. And I am really very glad to meet you."

"And I you, Mrs. Burr."

"Please do call me Maria. Ah, John is here with mimosas for us."

Jake turned and saw that John, who was serving them, was as amazing as the women who served Roger and Maria. He was roughly five foot ten, appeared to be of Polynesian descent, and was built like Dwayne Johnson. Jake thought to himself, *Well, a little eye candy for Mrs. Burr, too. This place is really strange. Incredible, but strange.*

Dismissing that thought, he thanked John, toasted Maria, and said, "Your estate is truly beautiful. Is all this land yours?"

"Thank you. Yes, we have about thirty-four thousand acres. Our property stretches three miles or so in any direction from the house."

"Wow. That must make it hard to get your mail," Jake said with a chuckle.

"What? Oh, yes. I guess it must. And we back up to land that belongs to the state, so we effectively have several hundred thousand acres around us that are pretty much like they were when this country was first settled."

"Really!"

"Yes, really." Roger had joined them. "I hope you're feeling a bit more refreshed. Did you find the wardrobe we arranged to be to your liking?"

Jake raised his glass to Roger. "Everything is perfect here. The clothes you arranged for me—with my name in them, no less—your home and your property, the staff." Jake paused, "Yes, everything is . . . *perfect.*"

Roger went on, ignoring Jake's more than slightly ironic tone. "I believe you and Maria were talking about the grounds here. You know, there were competing visions for America when it was founded. Many, largely Northerners, wanted to see industry prosper, grow, and develop. Others, like Jefferson, believed the future for America was to remain focused on agriculture. In the South, an emphasis on agriculture meant the need for cheap labor. Slavery was the answer to that need. Of course, slavery was wrong. Today, fortunately, we have the ability to achieve Jefferson's vision for an agrarian society without the need for slavery and its inherent evils. We call our estate *Patience*. The setting is so relaxing, and it affords us the opportunity to take our time with life . . . to enjoy the gifts nature has given us. All things in due time.

"But enough about that for now. I promised to feed you and to answer your questions." Roger gestured toward the table that had been set for them. "Let's sit. I want to first hear from you about what you remember and help you fill in the blanks where I can."

John held Maria's chair for her, and she, Roger, and Jake sat down to the fruit Kate had brought them along with several covered dishes. John began to uncover the food while Kate poured drinks. John announced shrimp and grits, scrambled eggs, lox, well-done thick-cut bacon, and a hefty whole-grain toast. Kate had poured coffee for Maria and Roger and delivered chai tea with milk to Jake. Importantly for Jake, John also placed a bottle of Tabasco sauce in a silver holder next to him. The Tabasco triggered another memory for Jake, who recalled telling people he only ate certain foods as a delivery vehicle for Tabasco, which he consumed in large amounts.

Once again, Jake was off balance. "I don't know how you

did this. Is it a trick? You're serving exactly what I would have wanted for breakfast without asking me. And how did you know, Kate, that I drink tea instead of coffee?"

Kate just bobbed her head and smiled. "So happy you are pleased, Mr. Jake."

"By the way, thanks for the Tabasco, John." John nodded in return.

Roger's smile was more expansive. "Eat and enjoy. What's the last thing you remember before waking here this morning?" He leaned toward Jake and waited for his response.

"Nothing. Really nothing. I had a dream this morning. I was cold as hell, then I was in a garden-like structure that reminded me of the conservatory at the Opryland Hotel. And there was a tiger, so I called 911, but the operator told me no one could help me."

Maria seemed confused and started to ask a question, but Roger waved her off. "He was asking for help, dear. I'll explain it to you later."

Turning again to Jake, he said, "I can't tell you about the tiger, but the cold is interesting. Why do you think you remember being so cold? Obviously, it isn't cold here."

Jake involuntarily shivered even though it was a warm, sunny morning. "It was so cold, like a bitterly cold winter, and I was freezing. I don't know why, but I *was* freezing." He was lost in thought, but nothing came up.

After several moments of silence, Roger sat back in his chair. "Well, that's because you *did* freeze, Jake."

Jake's brows furrowed in disbelief.

"My head wrangler, Hank, and I found you in the snow on Whiskey Mountain in Wyoming. I had taken a trip to Wyoming to do some hunting, riding, and fishing. You must have fallen into a crevice on the mountain during the winter.

Riding to the top of the mountain is not a particularly smart thing to do in the winter, but it worked out all right for you.

“Apparently, your horse stumbled, and you fell into the crevice and hit your head. You must have frozen pretty quickly that night, when there were several inches of fresh snow on the mountain. Because you were still alive just before you froze, you were preserved pretty well. If everything hadn’t happened exactly as it did, you would be dead now instead of sitting here with us. Oh, and it was particularly opportune that we had such a warm period in the last few months. Otherwise you’d still be buried under a foot or two of snow.”

Jake’s vision tunneled as he started remembering some of what he had forgotten. He was riding Yankee, his horse. There were a number of wild horses on the mountain. If he could herd them back down into the valley and corral them, the Kinloch Ranch could use them in the spring. It was stupid to ride the mountain in mid-October, yet he had a sense he wanted to do it for some reason. Maybe he had needed the money? Did he work at the Kinloch? He couldn’t remember his motivation or any other details, but he did remember that Yankee had stumbled and he had pitched forward. That was it. Nothing else, either before the mountain or after.

“So, I fell in October. What month is this?”

“September.”

“I’m missing eleven months?”

“What year did you fall, Jake?”

Jake squinted his eyes, trying to remember. “It was 2019.”

Maria spoke softly. “Jake, it is 2242. You are missing two hundred and twenty-three years.”