

Chapter 1

Shovels

“Are you sure this is where you buried the bodies?” asked Glen Martin, gasping for air in the moonlight, his folksy plaid shirt drenched in sweat. He was exhausted, and mentally drained. The boldfaced lies his mind had been using to sweet-talk the rest of his aching body to move were at an end. His weary arms could no longer dig.

The hot and humid night was unbearable, even for Florida in early April. A pungent orange blossom fragrance saturated the wild orchard. The partially obscured moon possessed a curious clarity, reserved for cold, winter nights. Martin, standing waist deep in a hole he helped dig, planted his shovel with a thrust. He wiped his sweaty forehead with his soiled sleeve.

Clay Augustine, a robust three hundred pounds, wore a determined look on his face, along with oversized clothing, as he dug beside Martin. “They have to be,” he said, shaking his head as if he were waving off a mosquito without the use of his hands. “They just have to be.”

“This is the third hole we’ve dug. How long are we going to keep this up?”

Clay Augustine ignored the question and tried to dig faster.

“I said...it’s our third hole tonight.”

“Heard you the first time,” said Clay, annoyance in his voice. He flung another shove full of dirt into the darkness. “But, really, this could be it.”

“If I’m not mistaken you said the very same thing last week.”

“Yeah, but this time I mean it.”

“And you said *that* two weeks before that.”

Clay Augustine dug undeterred. No response would be forthcoming.

Glen Martin annoyed, abandoned the shovel he had planted. Lifting with his arms and then hands, he climbed up out of the hole into the darkness, dislodging dirt along the edge. His fifty-nine year old back straightened under protest as the pain made him aware of his body’s displeasure. He was happy to be out of any hole at his age, no point egging on the inevitable.

Acres of wild trees shrouded his view. He could faintly see the ghostly glow from the backside of Orange Groves High School in the distance. The structure was hard not to see. It was the only light for miles. To its south, almost as far, the black outline of Russell’s oak, rising above the endless sea of smaller trees. The gigantic oak blotted out a portion of the dark horizon, hiding a handful of stars in the eastern sky. Glen hobbled away from the hole to an orange tree, his body stiffening.

Clay paused from his digging. “We don’t have time for breaks.”

“Please don’t go confusing this with a break, Clay. Don’t you go and do that.”

“This hole isn’t going to dig itself.”

“I’m aware.”

Augustine stared into the shadows confused. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying this old body is done for tonight. It’s got nothing more to give.”

Clay Augustine was beside himself, figuratively speaking of course, because two of him would have never fit into the hole. “You can’t be serious?”

“Why? Don’t I look serious to you?”

“How would I know? I can’t even see you.”

“Just as well really. I’ll be over here resting.”

Clay aggravated, grabbed his shovel and scooped it into the dirt again.

“Let me know when you’ve had enough.”

Augustine muttered something derogatory with just a hint of profanity.

“I didn’t quite catch that,” said Martin amused. “Did you say something?”

“No, nothing,” said Clay grumbling. “I was talking to myself.”

“I thought as much,” said Glen Martin to the obvious lie. The strained conversation was over, and the darkness peaceful again. Glen sat down and eased up against a tree. With his thin frame leaning against the trunk, he relaxed. Surveying the night, Glen admired the silhouettes of the trees that surrounded them. A hoard of pines had spread throughout the wild groves decade by decade. The uncultivated orchard shed its straight rows years ago and the discernable, unobstructed dirt avenues that existed between the fruit laden trees were no more.

The rhythmic noise of Clay’s shovel was the only sound for some time.

Glen broke the silence first. “You should have marked the grave.”

Clay Augustine gave out a laborious groan and stopped digging. He turned to where he thought Martin was in the darkness and glared at him. “Damn it, Glen, we aren’t retrieving buried treasure here. Why would it ever occur to me in a thousand years to mark the exact spot?”

Oh please, give me one conceivable reason, you know, because I would love to fucking hear it. Think about what you're saying. Hell, when I planted them, Richard Nixon was president for Christ sake."

"I'm just saying is all," said Glen.

"Please don't," said Clay intensity. He was irritated and his hefty, calorie-laden body fatigued. Clay planted his shovel and steadied his breath.

A warm breeze rustled the trees and leaves. From the darkness, several hard thuds came as a handful of rotten oranges thumped the ground, cracking a few dead branches.

Clay Augustine gazed at the starry sky as he leaned against his planted shovel, resting. His eyes lost in the magnificent heavens. "What time you got?"

Glen fought a yawn. "It's almost four. We don't have much darkness left."

"I'm not giving up. Not yet."

"All right, have it your way, Clay. Be as stubborn as always."

Augustine didn't look happy but kept an angry retort to himself.

"I'd keep this in mind if I were you," said Glen Martin. "I'll soon be at home in my own bed sound asleep, while you're still out here digging in the daylight for the world to see. Of course, that's not such a big of a risk out in the middle of the orchard, but someone is going to see your car out on that dirt road. Could cause a few people in town to wonder what you could be doing out here at this time of the morning. That kind of gossip you don't need."

Clay Augustine stared back at the shadows at the base of the dark tree.

"Don't you think?" asked Glen, seeking advice.

Augustine's didn't want to give in but shrugged. "Ok, fine, you're right."

"It's truly a miracle."

“But...,” said Clay Augustine, “you need not worry yourself.”

Glen Martin tried to remember in his entire life where he ever enjoyed a response that began with the word ‘but.’ He couldn’t think of a one.

Clay Augustine gave a reassuring smile. “Glen, if this is it we won’t bother refilling the hole. We’ll take what we came for and get the hell out of here.”

“I like the sound of that,” said Glen reassured.

Clay pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his puffy red face. “I’m so happy.”

“Hold on a minute. What if this isn’t it? We’ll still need the time to refill it.”

“It will keep. I can’t imagine many people come out here much. I’ll take care of it some other night. You need not even come.”

Glen Martin agreed with a nod Clay couldn’t see. “How many more feet you think?”

Augustine didn’t appreciate the question. When secretly digging for bodies in the middle of a wild orchard during the dead of night, this was the verbal equivalent of being on a road trip and asking: Are we there yet? Gripping the handle of his shovel, Clay yanked it from the ground. “A couple feet or less, it’s hard to tell. It was a long time ago.”

“Maybe if you’d picked a more remote spot,” said Glen with no forethought.

Clay Augustine was digging again, his movements looked drained and painful. “You know that’s real great advice there, it surely is. Where were you four decades ago when I could have used it?”

Glen Martin, to his friend’s annoyance, answered the rhetorical question. “I was still at the Prom, if I remember correctly.”

Clay shook his head. “I don’t know about you sometimes...I just don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind,” said Clay in futility and digging with a purpose again.

The intermittent warm breeze returned, nudging a forest of trees into swaying motion. Glen watched silently from the base of his orange tree before falling asleep. The repeated noise of the shovel penetrating the soil resonated into the orchard. The darkness defied only by that sound.

An hour or so had passed in the orchard. The darkness hadn't gone anywhere. Glen Martin awoke to dirt clumps peppering his body. A nearby shovel was launching the earthy projectiles into flight.

“What do you think you're doing?” said Glen, protesting to the night. Disoriented from his slumber, his hands instinctively flew up into the air to block the next salvo of dirt. When another batch of earth didn't arrive, he cautiously lowered his arms and looked around.

A skull with an arm for a neck stared back at him from the edge of the hole.

Glen Martin, still propped up against the tree, scrambled from the skull as fast as he could. Adrenaline surged through his body, his aged heart pounding.

Subtle laughter came from the deeper hole.

“Damn you, Clay!” said Glen, warily turning toward the hole again.

“It may well come to that, but in the meantime, keep your voice down.”

“What in God's name do you think you are doing?”

“Never mind that now. Get over here and bring a flashlight.”

Glen Martin got up off the moist ground as fast as his sore stiff body would permit. Walking with difficulty to their discarded backpacks, he slowly bent down and rifled through the contents. Once he found what he was looking for he hobbled to the edge of the hole, which was two feet deeper than an hour ago. Clay held the skull out in his hand like a baseball.

“Did you find them?” asked Glen, turning on the flashlight. *Please, Lord, let this be it*

“I think I found...”

“Yes...you think you found what?”

“Jimmy Hoffa.”

“I don’t think that’s very funny,” said Glen.

“No,” said Clay Augustine, “I don’t suppose you would.”

“Did you find something or not?”

“That’s why I woke you. It’s the decisive moment. Give me the flashlight.”

Glen Martin dropped the flashlight to his friend, letting gravity do the work.

With the bottom of the hole illuminated, Clay crouched to examine the bones he unearthed.

Glen knelt at the edge, anxiously waiting for the next lottery ball to drop. Waves of leaves rolled through the trees as the wind returned.

Glen was impatient. “Well?”

Clay hesitated and stood up. He stared up at his friend.

Glen Martin smiled. “You found it, didn’t you?”

Clay Augustine turned away and looked back into the hole.

“What’s the good word? Did you find them or not?”

“No,” said Clay frustrated, “I didn’t.”

“I don’t understand. You found a skull, right. Maybe you’re mistaken.”

Clay knelt and reverently placed the human skull next to what was left of its body before he stood up. “I’m not. No matter how much you want me to be.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Clay Augustine switched the flashlight off, letting the darkness envelope them. “Only found one skeleton here, Glen. No matter how inconvenient to our hopes, I buried the bodies together. Stands to reason they would still be together all these years later, don’t you think? And even if you could explain away that glaring omission, my father’s World War II Luger that he smuggled out of Germany, should still be here and it’s most certainly not.” He despondently shook his tired head. “We’ve dug in the wrong place.”

“This can’t be the wrong place. Not again.”

“I’m afraid it is,” said Augustine solemnly. “I read my father’s diary after his death. Did you know he had been near the Danish border at the end of World War II in Europe?”

“Not really the time to stroll down memory lane, Clay.”

“A disguised Heinrich Himmler had been captured by the Allies there. The very same area.”

“So what?”

“My father found a pistol carefully hidden among Himmler’s things. He apparently liberated it for himself. It’s the very same Luger we’re looking for today.”

“Did your father say anything to you about the Luger once it went missing?”

“No. Nothing. Not a word.

“He may have suspected the truth.”

“I’m sure he heard the rumors too,” said Clay.

Glen Martin suddenly perplexed, pointed down into the hole. “Who is that poor soul then?”

“I have no idea. It could be anybody.”

“Anybody,” said Martin, letting the word linger.

Clay Augustine displayed a look of arrogance Glen never appreciated. “Come on now. You have family roots in Bedlam. You remember the whispered stories growing up. Blacks pulled

from their cars after dark if they were on the wrong side of the tracks at night, usually by a few good old boys. The fortunate ones were beaten. Those not so fortunate would just disappear.”

Glen Martin didn't readily like to acknowledge Harrison County's tainted past, so he didn't. Not a hard thing for him to do, really, ignorance worked for him.

Clay Augustine's body moved gingerly as he retrieved the shovels and passed them up. “I'm surprised this hasn't happened more. We've been lucky.”

“Lucky...”

“Maybe that wasn't the right choice of words.”

“Agreed,” said Glen Martin as he hesitantly offered his hand. Clay grabbed hold.

Bracing himself, Glen struggled to help pull Clay up out of the hole. After three strenuous attempts, he succeeded, to his arm's overwhelming gratitude.

They each took a shovel and dropped enough dirt into the makeshift grave to cover up the unearthed skull and bones. They hid the fresh turned soil, in and out of the hole, with loose shrubbery, dead branches, and leaves. Glen took a GPS reading on his BlackBerry and saved it.

After collecting their gear, they headed west, away from the high school and Russell's Oak. Clay Augustine led the way at first, but soon fell behind. Even though tired and sore, they walked at a steady pace for most of their trek, trampling through a good portion of the wild grove without speaking. Yet, another failure on their part, what was there to say.

Near the end of their journey though the woods, Clay abruptly stopped and leaned against a dead tree that creaked from under his weight. He was pale and short of breath.

When Glen noticed his friend was no longer moving, he stopped, put down the shovels, and waited. The break lasted several minutes. “Come on, Clay, not much further now.”

Clay Augustine didn't look convinced but nodded and pulled himself together. A loud creak came from the tree when he removed his weight and stood upright (the tree would have been relieved had it not already been dead). They continued onward through the groves.

The night soon retreated and daylight broke.

Clay Augustine took the lead again as Glen slowed down and diligently followed. They finally emerged from the wild orchard as if they had found the Fountain of Youth. The obscure dirt road where they left their cars lay ahead; one was a late model green Chrysler, and the other a silver Lexus.

With their latest weekend excursion concluded, Glen Martin tried to be optimistic. "Clay, look, they don't start clearing for another five months, and when it comes to construction, you know that's tentative at best. We have time. A whole lot can happen between now and then. Let's try again next week. I should recover by then."

Clay Augustine glanced at him with a sullen look, boarding on melancholy. Anything he uttered would be rooted in his frustration and fear. "Should I pray on it, Glen?" he said sarcastically. "Is that what you want me to do? Will God take care of this one for me you think?"

Glen Martin knew Clay was disappointed, but it didn't excuse his bitterness. "Forgiveness is always an option. You just have to ask for it."

Clay Augustine was going to lash out again, but refrained; he was too tired to do even that. Turning away from his old friend, he gazed back into the wild groves. He imagined he could see through both the trees and intervening years. A collection of memories and feelings returned. He fought to get the words out; to finally say them aloud to another person. The words finally came.

"I killed them without hesitation," said Clay Augustine in a whisper.

Glen was shocked to hear the words after so many years. “From what I’ve heard most assumed they just ran off together, never to return.”

“Believe what you will, Glen, but to this day, I still get looks from those with roots here in Harrison. That hasn’t changed nor will it ever. That is the reality.” He paused for a moment, his mind wandered back to the subject. “Everyone was partially right though. They sure are gone.”

The morbid words hung in the air, out of place at the dawn of a new day.

Clay Augustine grew angry, turning back toward his friend. “Did they *really* think they could injure me, humiliate me...and get away with it?”

Glen Martin watched his friend, but didn’t say a word.

Augustine was lethargic. “You want to know the funny thing? This all makes perfect sense to me now. It really does. After all these years, you just knew there would be a reckoning. Had to be. It was to be expected.” He stared back at the wild groves. “There is no forgiveness in this life, only the temporarily unknown, complicated by layers of secrets.”

Glen Martin sought the unspoken truth he avoided for years. “Why did you do it, Clay?”

“You’ve never asked me that before, Glen. I’ve always admired you for it.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint.”

Clay Augustine halfheartedly tried to smile again and failed even as his strained voice trembled. His eyes were moist. “I couldn’t live with the jealousy that burned within me. I had never felt such betrayal, before or since. Consumed with anger and hatred, I had an unshakeable compulsion to share my pain with those who inflicted it.” He paused and tried to steady his voice. “You never love a woman the same, not like your first. She was so beautiful...”

Glen Martin had waited three decades for the truth. He didn’t say a word.

Clay's emotions forced their way to the surface. "I can still see their faces of disbelief. Such fury I had inside me that night. More than enough for both of them."

Glen wore a look of sympathy. He didn't know what to say.

"I was only seventeen," said Clay faintly. Regret saturated his voice.

Glen Martin nodded his understanding as they held each other's gaze; both were soaked in sweat and covered with a mixture of sugar sand and black dirt. Twenty-four hours had passed since either had slept. Clay Augustine looked like a man who was at the end of his rope, had tied a huge knot, and was hanging on for dear life.

The sunrise blazed over the treetops as if they were on fire.

Not knowing what else to do or say, Glen Martin backed away to his Lexus and opened the trunk. The crisp morning air brimmed with a freshness that only the dawn brings. Wiping off the shovels, he laid them in the trunk, next to where he placed his backpack. He slammed it shut.

"Will I see you in church tomorrow?" asked Glen finally.

Augustine turned toward his Chrysler. "Elise and I will be there."

"You've got yourself a real special woman there, a real special woman."

"So she has repeatedly told me," said Clay in mock agreement. "You got something exceptional planned for tomorrow or are you going to wing it again?"

"You might find a few words of strength and comfort in tomorrow's service."

"I have little doubt," said Clay a few feet from his automobile.

"Same time next Friday?" asked Glen Martin like it was a weekly poker game, trying to lift the spirits of his oldest friend.

Clay Augustine nodded and unlocked his car with a beep that echoed. He was fading fast in the morning sun. "Good night, Reverend."