

PROLOGUE AND CHAPTER 1

INTO THE DEVIL'S DEN – Snared by Their Own Lies

PROLOGUE

THE BRAKES of the eighteen-wheeler squealed and hissed to a stop. Jaali's breath caught in his throat, as it did for the Mexicans jammed shoulder to shoulder in the blackness of the tractor-trailer. The smuggler, the one the immigrants called the coyote, warned there would be a stop at the border...warned absolute quiet a must. One tiny cough, an accidental scraping of a foot across metal, a baby's cry could trigger detection by U.S. Border Patrol.

Jaali pressed his ear against the cold steel frame and strained to hear the muffled voices outside. Indistinguishable words switched from casual to barbed altercation faster than the sweep of a magician's wand. With each rise and fall of tone, tension clung to the trailer walls like an unrelenting magnet. Jaali and the others waited, not moving, not breathing.

Moments later, a door slammed. The truck's diesel engine rumbled to life and the eighteen-wheeler lurched forward. Jaali chanced a quick gulp of muggy air saturated with the rancid smell of fear. The merged angst traveled through the dark tomb like a contagious virus, an ominous warning that safety and freedom were still miles down the road.

Jaali adjusted the bandana across his nose and mouth. The scarf did little to filter the gamy desert sweat and gaseous aroma of recycled beans that escaped from the packed humanity. He twisted and turned, attempting to find a comfortable position within the dark steel chamber. Finally, he located a tiny space he could call his own, pulled his duffle bag tight beneath his knees and buttocks. No one was going to jar him loose or steal his belongings, particularly these worthless Mexican infidels who endured this miserable journey just for the privilege of being exploited by the Great Satan.

Jaali ran his hand down his pants leg, touched the SOG SEAL knife strapped to this calf. He'd do all these peons a favor if he'd just slit their throats one by one and help them escape their miserable existence. *It would just smell worse than it already did*, he snorted under his breath with disgust. He chanced another quick breath of air, closed his eyes, and then slowly released it. *Patience*, he reminded himself. *Only a few more hours and this distasteful journey would end.*

Jaali's lip curled with bitter humor. His journey had just begun. No more blind trust in the impotent fools who led Isis. No more allowing others to control his destiny. If he had listened to his heart in the first place, he would have been home instead of rotting in prison when the cursed Israeli missiles fell. Deep-seated hatred singed his gut; time for the damned Jews and their puppet masters to pay the penalty for destroying his home, his livelihood, his son, his woman.

The truck bounced. Clammy bodies slammed into one another. Jaali braced himself against the steel hull until the ride smoothed once again.

Soon his Muslim brothers, Chadi and Hassib, would be joining him. Mahmoud and Michel were already in place, biding time, recruiting, until plans were set. Jaali clasped his hands together, bowed his head. *Insha'Allah*, if Allah wills there will be a safe haven to hide under the radar of Immigration until the time was right. That is, if his cousin, Rashid, had done everything he was told.

An acrid taste fouled Jaali's mouth...my cousin, a poor excuse of a man. Even as a teenager, he had been a constant embarrassment to the family, seducing women of all ages. But to marry that...that bleached-blond American whore! A woman old enough to be his own mother; flaunting her money and decadent lifestyle; throwing it in his mother and father's face until they could no longer bear the shame.

Revulsion twisted in Jaali's gut like a hot poker. How could his cousin turn his back on his family, his religion, his Syria? This man's adulterous and self-indulgent life went against everything Islam stood for. His cousin was a disgrace to his family, to all the faithful. There was a jihad fingering its way into every corner of the world. Not one Muslim could be spared.

For now Jaali must tolerate Rashid's transgressions, accept his cousin's generosity, and feign humility for any small favors. He had no choice. If not for Rashid, Jaali's dream of bringing jihad to the United States would remain just that, a dream. Without his cousin and his "wife's" money, there'd be no sham marriage, no green card to observe legal niceties, no finances to prepare for the day he and his soldiers would shake the world with their fiery mission. For now he must indulge his cousin's immoral behavior. Allah would be merciful once victory was achieved.

The eighteen-wheeler screeched to a stop, air brakes hissed, and the truck idled at a standstill for several minutes. Diesel fumes seeped into invisible vents choking what little fouled recycled-air was left. Jaali gasped like a drowning man drawing his last breath; fought against the stifling heat and fumes that fused with body-odor. He, along with the swarm of other illegals, stirred like a herd of cattle on the way to slaughter. The Mexicans toward the back banged on the large steel doors. Mumbles and anxious voices undulated throughout the dark cave that had been their prison for the last several hours.

Moments later the large double-doors swung open. A blast of cool, fresh air rushed into the van. The Mexicans spilled out of the truck faster than floodwaters bursting over a dam.

When Jaali reached the edge of the trailer, he stopped, stared into the moonless night. All the bodies once jammed inside the tractor-trailer were now scattered somewhere into the darkness; they were invisible to the naked eye leaving him alone somewhere along the Mexican and United States border.

He hopped to the ground with his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, stumbled for a brief moment, but managed to stay upright. The darkness outside was nothing compared to the darkness of the last three or four hours. Infinite stars glistened in the sky like a blanket of diamonds spread above him. A lonesome wail echoed in the distance accompanied by the melodic hum of locusts and the screech of a nearby owl. The desert creatures' songs added a serenity he hadn't enjoyed since he was a young boy.

Jaali took a deep cleansing breath. Pure crisp air perfumed with the pungent aroma of sagebrush bathed his lungs and washed away the burnt scent of Molotov cocktails, TNT and other explosives' smells that had permanently taken residence in his nostrils long ago.

In the distance above the rolling hills, bursts of multicolored lights flashed, and then disappeared. With narrowed eyes, Jaali curled his upper lip, spat on the ground. *Enjoy your independence while you can, infidels*, he thought. *My brothers and I will soon awaken a fear hidden deep within your souls — a fear that will shake the ground beneath your privileged feet. What a pleasure it will be to watch your beloved Fourth of July blow up in your face.*

“Beautiful. No, *Señor*?”

Jaali jerked around, grabbed for his serrated SOG SEAL knife strapped to his calf.

The coyote's hands flew up, “Whoa now, *compadré*.”

Not taking his eyes off the smuggler, Jaali pointed the knife at him. “Where's my car...my papers?”

The coyote took another step back, held both hands still in front of him, and slowly pumped them trying to calm Jaali. “I assure you, *Señor*, everything that was promised is in place,” he said, and motioned Jaali to follow.

Before taking a step, Jaali glared at the smuggler and left little doubt his knife was but a flash-move away in case the man had any bright ideas other than honorable ones.

Satisfied the smuggler was ready to keep their deal Jaali sheathed his knife, slipped the duffle bag strap over his shoulder once again, and followed the man to the truck cab.

The coyote opened the passenger door. “*Señor*, please, I must take you to a different location. I assure you everything is waiting.”

Jaali climbed into the cab and shut the door. While the coyote closed the rear trailer doors and walked around to the driver's side, Jaali laid his knife on his lap, hand resting on the handle.

The smuggler hopped into the cab. His eyes locked onto the drawn knife, but he said nothing. He started the diesel engine and pulled away from the desolate location. The moonless night revealed only the dark profile of Saguaro cactus scattered across the rocky terrain and rolling hills.

For several minutes the two men bounced along the sandy dirt road without a word. The coyote down shifted and stopped at an intersection. He glanced up and down the road void of headlights, reached over and only now switched on the truck lights. “It won't be long, *Señor*,” he said. Turning right, he pulled onto a two-lane asphalt road, and shifted into the next gear.

“Where are you taking me?” Jaali asked.

“There is an abandoned gas station a few miles up the road,” the coyote said. “Your vehicle is parked inside an old garage, covered with a tarpaulin.”

Jaali nodded.

The remainder of the drive was in silence.

When the abandoned gas station came into view, the coyote downshifted, turned into the parking lot, and drove behind the empty building. He stopped, turned off his lights, but left the engine idling. The smuggler took his hands off the steering wheel, scooted closer to the door and leaned against it. “If you look into the glove box, you’ll find a large envelope. Inside are car keys, a doctored passport, and Florida driver’s license. There are also maps that will direct you to Florida.”

Hand still on the knife, Jaali opened the compartment and pulled out the envelope. Everything the coyote promised was inside. “Before I pay the remaining fee, take me to the car,” Jaali ordered. “I need to make sure the automobile is in working order.”

“*Sì, sí,*” the man said. “*Venga,* come with me.”

The men climbed out of the truck cab and headed for the abandoned building. As the coyote opened the rusty entrance, the garage door squealed on its hinges. He pulled the tarpaulin off the car with one wide sweep, tossed it in a corner. “Hand me the key, *Señor.* I’ll start the car and back it out for you. That should prove I’m an honorable man.”

Jaali hesitated, but then opened the envelope and handed the man the key. The coyote climbed into the car and backed out of the garage.

While the Mexican did what he promised, Jaali turned his back, unzipped the concealed money belt under his shirt and counted the final payment of five thousand dollars.

The coyote climbed out of the late model Saturn, reached for the money, and said, “*Señor,* I’ll take my money and be on my way.”

“Of course,” Jaali said releasing the bills.

A broad grin brushed across the coyote’s face. He clinched the bills tight in his fist, crossed himself, money still in hand. “*Gracias, Gracias, Señor.* This money,” the smuggler’s voice cracked, “is final payment to the cartel. At last my wife and daughters will be freed from their hellish bondage.”

The two men shook hands, and then the coyote turned to leave, only took two steps before Jaali drew his serrated SOG SEAL knife, and slashed across the man’s throat.

He wiped the knife clean on the smuggler’s pants leg and sheathed the weapon again. Jaali retrieved the money and dragged the body into the garage, covered it with the tarpaulin, and then shut the garage door.

For a brief moment he considered burning the building and the eighteen-wheeler. But, the last thing he needed was authorities on his back only hours after he arrived in the U.S. It

would be best if *they* discovered an out of gas truck and the concealed smuggler's body. Easy enough to assume wetbacks were the culprits after a deal gone sour.

Jaali climbed into the Saturn, switched on the overhead light, and rechecked the doctored passport and Florida Driver's License. He tucked them in his shirt pocket and pulled a United States map from the folder the coyote had given him. Jaali spread it over the console. The route through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama had been highlighted all the way to Northwest Florida; Destin, Florida was circled in red. A grin twitched Jaali's mouth. "Good job, cousin. You might be worth saving after all."

CHAPTER 1

Two years later

Miami, Florida

SAM STEELE switched on the lights to his office. As much as he enjoyed early morning, arriving to work before sunrise was anything but his first choice. But lying in bed staring into darkness and obsessing about his ex-wife resurfacing after twenty years was worse. What in hell could Sylvia want after all this time? Whatever it was, it would not be good. No need agonizing about that now. He had most of the day to do that. Right now he needed to tackle those Immigration files his assistant, Maggie, had been bugging him about for the last month.

Sam removed his frayed Stetson and tossed it toward the hat rack standing in the corner behind his desk. The buckskin flipped twice through the air with the same precision spin it had for the last fifteen years. Right on cue, the hat caught a hook and came to rest. Sam smiled. "Most reliable possession I own," he said walking behind his desk. He thumped the crown, and then gently ran his hand along the brim's edge as if rewarding his favorite pet.

He placed his brief case on the scratched, cigarette-burned desk next to his daughter's photo. She was holding two blue ribbons – one for herself, the other for the feisty Appaloosa that only allowed Terri Anne on his back. Sam picked up the cowhide frame, dusted it with his shirtsleeve, and positioned it in the exact spot. He stared at it affectionately. *Sure as hell glad my daughter takes after me*, he thought, and not that mother of hers. *Yep, the best damn thing that could've happened to he and Terri was Sylvia running out on them and never attempting to contact either in all these years.*

Suddenly, the pit in his stomach slithered like a thousand snakes hatched at the same time. *My God! Terri Anne!* His mind raced.

What if Maggie discovers Sylvia's actual identity and inadvertently mentions her appointment to Terri Anne over Thanksgiving. His daughter would never forgive him if she found out her mother was actually alive. If he thought Terri was growing away from him now, this looming nightmare could destroy their relationship permanently. He should have agreed to meet Sylvia away from the office. *Smooth move, Cowboy*, he thought.

Sam slammed his fist against the desktop. *Stop. You're doing it again, obsessing like you did all night.* Sylvia had no interest in Terri Anne when she was a baby or while she was growing up. There's no chance she would care today anymore than she did then. He would give Sylvia ten minutes of his time, feign an important meeting and once again she would fade out of his life. All he had to do was keep remembering that life was good. Terri was busy at Florida State pursuing her veterinarian degree. Outside of work he and Maggie enjoyed each other's company, no strings attached, and most of his Immigration cases were

as mundane as ever. His daughter would come home Thanksgiving like she promised, and they would watch football and old John Wayne movies all weekend like they did while she was growing up.

Sam walked to the credenza, started a pot of coffee. He needed to trust everything was going to be all right. Sylvia's visit today will become just one more bad memory – just a hiccup in another day of his life. No one would be the wiser.

He gazed out the picture window overlooking Biscayne Bay. Predawn chased darkness away and promised another perfect day in South Florida. The rising sun cast a pink hue across the blue waters. Sailboats, main sails tucked tight against mast, bobbed in the distance.

First light had always been Sam's favorite time. The quiet solitude had a way of rejuvenating his spirit, giving him reason to look forward to each day in a new light and not focus on the past, which was difficult to do sometimes – particularly today. He probably was reading too much into Sylvia's appointment anyway. Admittedly he was as curious about her reason for wanting to see him, as he was bothered by her reason for showing up.

Perking coffee released a rich aroma throughout the office and quickly replaced the slight musty smell that lingered in the room despite all efforts to disguise the moldy odor. Sam poured the hot liquid into a stained Texas Aggie mug and watched as the nightlights in the distance winked off one by one.

The antique wall clock chimed six A.M. He glanced over at the still unopened briefcase on his desk. Those pending Immigration files were not going away, and he had promised Maggie he would take care of them today.

He returned to his desk, sat down and leaned back in the faded faux leather chair. His butt, back and shoulders molded into his old friend. Sam took one last sip of the coffee, reached across, and pulled his briefcase toward him. He unsnapped the latches, took out a stack of files, slid them to one side, and shut the case. For a brief moment he looked at the pile of files, back out the window, and then finally pulled one of the files toward him.

Sam flipped the folder open, scanned the familiar case, and heaved a heavy sigh. He marked it with a yellow sticky, jotted a note to his assistant Maggie, "No follow-up needed." Sam slid the file to the left and pulled another from the stack.

CHAPTER 2

SAM pulled his gaze from the antique wall clock ticking away the minutes before Sylvia would arrive. He reached deep into the desk drawer and searched for the crushed, near empty cigarette package. It was still there. Sam inhaled the stale sweet tobacco, but returned the cigarettes to their hiding place. Sylvia had been the reason he had started smoking twenty years ago, and she was the reason it took fifteen to quit.

He pressed the intercom button. "Maggie, when my two o'clock arrives, tell her I'm on long distance."

"So now you've added lying to my job description," she said.

Sam released a long sigh. "I'm not in the mood for your attitude today. Just do it."

"Who is this mystery woman anyway?"

"None of your concern," Sam said.

"I'll find out sooner or later."

A dull throb nagged at his temple. "Has my daughter called?"

"No, Terri Anne hasn't checked in."

"If she does, interrupt me no matter what."

"When are you going to realize she's an adult and tired of your smothering?" Maggie asked.

Sam dropped the phone into the cradle and snatched the crumpled package once again. He shook his head. *Women will be the death of me yet.*

He shoved a cigarette between his lips and stared at the clock inching toward two P.M. In a few moments, Sylvia would breeze back into his life without a second thought.

Sam slammed the desk drawer shut. Dormant anger roared to the surface. Once again he stood at their bedroom door, dripping with sweat and pointing his .45 at Sylvia and her wetback lover with the sheet pulled up to his neck, eyes bulging with fear. *She* just lay there, propped against pillows with a smug smile on her face; her body still glistened with perspiration.

This is ridiculous, Sam thought. Sylvia had not even arrived, and she was already controlling his emotions. He yanked the cigarette out of his mouth and tossed it into the trash.

The intercom buzzer startled him. Sam grabbed the phone and spoke louder than expected. "Yes, Maggie."

"Your two o'clock has arrived. Are you still on long distance," she asked, a sarcastic sting in her voice.

Sam squeezed the phone. "Tell Mrs. Maroun I'll be with her in a moment." He stared at the door knowing he should get up and greet her, but everything in him resisted. He drew in a deep breath, and then hit the intercom. "Send her in." He stood and waited for her entrance.

The door opened and Sylvia glided into the office. She stopped, arms reached out toward him. "Sam, it's so good to see you," she said, a playful lilt in her voice. "It's been too long."

Sylvia was as beautiful today as she was the first time he'd laid eyes on her. Blond ringlets escaped her upswept hair and framed her face. She was shorter than he remembered, but her sinuous body defied her height. Not one visible wrinkle blemished her forty-year-old face; her blue eyes, the shade of a summer sky, danced with that same inviting look that took a man to heaven, hell, and back again. Even now she reminded him of a wild untamed creature – one that should never be caged.

Before he realized it, she was behind the desk and had wrapped her arms around him, head barely reaching his chest.

Her embrace seemed to last an eternity. Sam tried to resist, but the intoxicating aroma of her expensive and familiar perfume triggered memories. Her warmth melted into his like the first time he had made love to her under the West Texas stars. Oh, how they'd laughed when she almost rolled him onto a cactus.

What are you doing, the words screamed in his head. This was the woman who cheated on you time and time again. This is the woman who deserted her two-month old baby.

Sam shook his head, forced the flood of thoughts back into the memory vault he had locked away long ago. He could not, would not allow her to rush into his life again. Sylvia Temple Maroun *would not* control Sam Steele again.

He took her gently by the arms. "Why don't you have a seat on the sofa?"

Sylvia affectionately patted his stomach and smiled. "Looks like you've put on a little weight," she winked, and then moved across the room.

"You have a wonderful office. Is that Biscayne Bay in the distance?" She didn't wait for an answer and continued her inspection. She straightened the Salina's bluebonnet painting. "I see you've come a long way from chasing wetbacks on the West Texas border."

"Yes, Terri Anne and I have had a wonderful life without you."

Her crystal blue eyes turned a callous gray, "Oh yes *your* daughter."

He suppressed the disgusted snarl twitching at his mouth. "You could have tried to contact *our* daughter at least once during the last twenty plus years."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "Honestly, must you harp on old wounds? Besides, *I* wanted an abortion, but, oh no, you and daddy insisted on marriage." Sylvia wiped nonexistent dust from his favorite Charles Russell sculpture sitting on one end of the credenza. "You should be happy you got *something* out of our marriage."

Rage rushed to the surface and singed his cheeks. Now he remembered why he had pointed that .45 and almost killed her that night. He would have if their baby daughter in the nearby room had not cried out. Sam narrowed his eyes. "Sylvia, *why* are you here?"

"Always short and to the point, aren't you, Sam?"

He came around the desk and leaned against the edge, arms folded across his chest. "Get on with it, Sylvia. Say what you must and leave. I have an important meeting this afternoon."

She sat on the sofa and crossed her shapely legs, revealing a hint of a bare, tanned thigh. "I want you to investigate my husband, Rashid Maroun. Find a way to deport him back to that God-forsaken desert from where he came."

Sam rubbed his thumb across his lips. "He's an immigrant?"

"Yes, from Syria."

"Most immigrants' reasons for coming to the United States are legitimate."

"Yes, that's probably true," Sylvia said, "but I think he's up to no good. You should see some of the lowlife Rashid brings into my home. They're all Middle Eastern with shifty eyes and smell like camel dung."

Sam rolled his eyes.

She shivered, "No really, Sam, their stares slice right through me." Sylvia wrapped her arms around her shoulders. "At times I fear for my life."

Sylvia's eyes softened and revealed a vulnerable side Sam wished he hadn't witnessed.

Stop this or she will once again snare you in her web, he thought. He gripped the desk rim, his eyes narrowed. "You have no right to ask me to use my position with the Immigration, particularly for your domestic problem."

Sylvia's confident poise slid from her face. "Please, Sam, I really need your help."

Sam furrowed his brow; his chest tightened. *Don't be so stubborn, you old fool*, he thought. After all, Sylvia was once the love of his life; she's the mother of their only child. Maybe he should give her one more chance.

Suddenly like a familiar old friend his protective barrier shot back into place. *No, no, he couldn't...he wouldn't endure that same pain by getting involved with her again — no matter the reason.*

"I don't know, Sylvia, this all..."

She didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. "I know I was a rotten wife...a worse mother." She tugged on her skirt hem and cast her eyes down. "I know I can't erase the

past." She glanced up; her eyes glistened. "Just for one moment try to forget the past...try to listen to a stranger who has come to you with suspicions."

"Suspicions? Suspicions about what?"

"That's the problem. I can't put my finger on it. I just know."

Sylvia clasped her hands together, and then dropped them in her lap. "The one that frightens me the most is Rashid's cousin, Jaali. Evil burns deep within his soul. He's always watching me. I feel his eyes even when he isn't around." She took a deep breath. "I don't trust him, Sam, and neither should you. Don't forget September 11th."

"Did either of them threaten you? Use physical force?" He asked.

"It's nothing they've said or done; at least that I can prove. That's why I came to you. I need an expert with connections."

He shook his head. "Are you sure you're not a little paranoid. You can't accuse every Middle Eastern of terrorism just because of what's happening around the world."

Sylvia's penetrating gaze pleaded. "You've *got* to believe me, Sam. My instincts are real."

"I know what's happened," he said. "You've gotten yourself into another bind. Daddy's dead and can't bail you out so you come running to me. You *have* heard of divorce, haven't you?"

"Divorce isn't enough. They'd still be in our country," she said.

"Buy your way out? You and your father were always good at that."

Sylvia moved to the edge of the sofa. "Just check on him, check on them both. Do whatever it takes to get those bastards out of my life and sent back to camel-land where they belong."

Sam avoided her pleading look. There was no way he would allow her to pull him in. He had to say something...anything to get her off his back. "Despite what you may think, the United States government doesn't deport people without just cause and evidence."

The intercom buzzed. He pressed the button, "Yes."

"Mr. Steele, if you don't leave now, you'll be late for your meeting."

"Thanks, Maggie, Mrs. Maroun was just leaving."

Sylvia picked up a sofa pillow, hugged it to her chest. "Please, give me five more minutes. I know I can convince you how serious this could be."

He shrugged. "Sorry, but this is an important meeting."

She replaced the pillow, reached down, and pulled a brown envelope from her purse. "Just look at this. If it doesn't persuade you something is going on, forget I was here."

Sylvia laid the package on the sofa. "If you change your mind, my cell phone number is written on the back." She gathered her purse and moved toward the door. "Just think about it, Sam, please."

He ignored pleading eyes and walked behind his desk. "Sylvia, one more thing before you leave," Sam said.

She flashed him her 'I won again smile'. "Yes."

"Terri Anne is fine, and thinks you're dead."

Sylvia slammed the door behind her.

Self-satisfaction rolled over Sam for the first time in years. He grabbed his Stetson and briefcase and started for the door. He stopped, glanced over his shoulder toward the envelope burning a hole in the couch.

Maybe he should take a quick look. As much as he wanted to ignore Sylvia's request, he had no business allowing personal feelings to interfere with his duty. He took a step toward the sofa. *Don't do it, Sam. Leave it alone*, his conscious warned. *Remember, this is Sylvia and Sylvia has a way of digging her claws deep into your core.*

Sam couldn't pull his eyes away from the brown package. If this Rashid guy and his cousin were up to something illegal, it *was* his job to check them out. *Damn you Sylvia!*

He picked up the envelope, unclipped the clasp. He stopped. If he looked inside, he would be giving in to his ex-wife and allow her back into his life. Why in the hell had she zipped into his world again and turned it upside down? How dare she try to use his position with ICE for a personal problem? Sam shook his head, and thought, *no, not this time; he wouldn't give Sylvia the satisfaction.*

Sam tossed the brown demon in the trashcan and hurried out the door.