

Chapter 1

South-East Queensland, Australia. Sunday 16 November 2008

It is in their eyes and their stance. These men have been used to torturing and killing ... with as little emotion as when swatting flies.

Sam Hall hopes that he looks innocent – bewildered and fearful, with his hands held high – all the years of special forces' training to resist interrogation. But, inside, the adrenalin is coursing through him.

Without weapons, could he take them out?

Very doubtful. They are both standing well beyond a flying kick distance and at a ninety-degree angle to each other. They have done this before ... and often.

He now knows that he is looking into the faces of two of the most dreaded men from the Argentinian junta's death squads of the late 1970s and early 1980s – the 'Dirty War'. But that was over a quarter of a century ago ... this is here and now in a valley behind the sparkling holiday strip and beaches of the Queensland Gold Coast.

What terror must those helpless people have felt being faced with either of these two in those horrible days of *Los Desaparecidos* – the Disappeared. Or had it just been a fatalistic resignation, with the hope that others would take their place in the resistance movement ... to get the story out?

Perhaps, he could distract them, duck, head for a corner and just flee for his life. Sam is part of a team. Where is the team? They don't know his current predicament.

Back in the junta days, the leader on the right was called *Mala Bestia*, Evil Beast – the other would have been *El Miedo*, the Fear. Their nicknames were very well known, although only a few victims ever survived to tell the tale.

Or maybe, he should just attack and go out in a noisy blaze of glory. The commotion might give the others a chance to get to his captors. But his role is to get court-admissible evidence to convict them; not to be a fallen hero. Others had tried the heroics in the past, but the problem is still here, staring at him.

His thoughts continue to roll.

‘So, your name and ... who are you really?’ the man on the right asks.

Arms starting to strain from being held high, Sam answers, ‘I’m Sam Hall. I just work for the caterer.’ His tone is a cross between angry and frustrated. ‘What’s this all about? Let me go. I need to get back to the kitchen. They are waiting for me.’

‘You are a liar, Sam Hall. I am an expert at picking liars. What have you seen here?’

‘Seen? Nothing. I’m here to work. I’m just a caterer’s assistant, for God’s sake.’ He gives an exasperated gasp. ‘I see a man with a gun holding me against a wall while you call me a liar. Now, let me go.’ The pitch of his voice rises. ‘This is madness!’

The man responds with a yellow-toothed smile ... predatory almost. ‘Do you know who I am?’

Sam affects confusion at being asked the question, before answering guilelessly. ‘The *Mayordomo* calls you *El Maestro*.’

‘Indeed.’ The teeth flash again. ‘The Master. Marco, here, and I have dealt with people like you for years and years. And still you come, pretending innocence.’

Suddenly, a large knife appears in his right hand.

‘You are not frightened, Sam Hall. Why is that? Why are you not frightened?’

‘I *am* frightened! Very fuckin frightened! Let me go!’

El Maestro merely smiles, a cat with a mouse smile, and quietly says, ‘Do you think you can attack a man with a weak left arm ...

and perhaps overpower him? Is that what you are thinking, Sam Hall?’

Marco remains stationary and the gun hand never wavers. There is a patient inevitability about their actions.

El Maestro continues, ‘I think you underestimate us, Mr Hall. Like so many before you.’

True, perhaps ... in one sense, given that he has now been caught.

Sam Hall is only in Queensland by coincidence to recuperate after a failed mission in Spain with the Dutch International Investigations Bureau and he has become embroiled in this dangerous business almost by accident.

But, underestimated?

He certainly shouldn't have. Sam's father, Andy Hall, had been a sergeant with the British Parachute Regiment in the Falkland Islands' war of 1982, against the Argentinian junta. Andy's father didn't often talk of that conflict but when he had, it was to speak of how hard the battles had been.

While the media in each country had engaged in jingoistic bravado, the fighting soldiers on the ground didn't ever underestimate their opponents. Close proximity to imminent death has a way of focusing the mind, the training and the actions.

And, at this moment, Sam is in the same life or death situation. Yes, he definitely understands the closeness of potential death. He has no illusions about these two men in front of him. His trained mind is still running through all possible scenarios ... and the most likely outcome is not pleasant. He is helpless in the hands of two experienced, sociopathic killers.

He looks again into their eyes and ...

AUSTRALIA

