

A Lifetime of Terror

A McKinney Brothers Novel

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PROLOGUE

June 1967

Heat radiated from the desert floor in all directions as the sun beat down on the parched earth. The approaching aircraft rose out of the valley from the west towards the Golan Heights. As they passed overhead, the ground to the north of the Sea of Galilee shook. The roar of the jet engines caused the young Syrian to cover his ears. The formation was so close to the ground that he felt the heat from the engines' exhaust, the fumes filling his lungs, the whirlwind of sand stinging his skin. He followed the jets heading east into Syrian territory, his family's territory. He saw the missiles hanging under each wing. It had begun.

Just the week before, when his parents thought they were alone, he heard his father say quietly to his mother, "We cannot match the military might of the Jews. They will come with great force. Their

American-made jets and weapons are superior to the Russian MiGs. I pray to Allah that we will put aside our hatred for the sake of our children.”

His mother had said nothing in reply, but her eyes filled with the sadness of generations of Syrians. She'd begged her husband to move the family to Damascus, away from the border with Israel. Away from the hatred, the fighting, the oppression. But her words fell on deaf ears.

“This is our home. We will stay.”

So they stayed. The day that she and her husband feared came upon them like a sandstorm and the young man was witness to his father's prophecy.

Those fateful words now echoed in his ears along with the thunder of the jets passing to the east. Moments later, the fifteen-year old heard the high pitched scream of the missiles as they darted from the attacking jets. The exploding fuel tanks of the Syrian MiG fighters, as they sat motionless on the ground, sent shock waves along the earth's surface. Shielding his eyes from the low morning sun, he saw the black plumes of smoke moments before he heard the muffled explosions. After another moment, the ground trembled again under his feet. He imagined the screams of men as their lives were snuffed out in an instant, either from the shock waves of a bomb blast or from the incinerating heat of a fireball.

From his position near the highest point in the Golan Heights, he looked to the northeast out over the lowlands towards Damascus. Then he looked to the southeast and the smaller cities as more explosions erupted at his homeland's air force bases. The complete annihilation of the Syrian Air Force was happening before his eyes. He slipped into a trance as another vision of his father came to mind. *We're not ready to defend our families. Our planes have no spare parts. Our pilots do not have the experience needed to survive real combat missions. They will be slaughtered.*

And his father would know. He was a jet mechanic at the military air base west of Damascus, north of Al Kiswah. He was trained by Soviet mechanics, the experts who knew the MiG jets inside and out.

With the early morning sun low over the horizon, the fifteen-year old placed a hand over his forehead to shield his eyes. He

watched the area near the base where his father worked, and saw the plume of black smoke rising into the sky, casting a shadow over a large area west of the great capital. He feared the worst; that his father's visions of his own death had come to pass right before his eyes. He cursed the Jewish pilots and their American made weapons. He felt like crying, but tears would not flow. He was a man, after all.

Only hours later, his fears would be realized, as news of the attack on the air base filtered back to his hometown of Al Qunaytirah. Their small home was filled with his mother's shrieks of anguish. For hours, her sobs consumed her and her family.

But what he thought were his worst fears only proved to be the beginning of his real-life nightmares. Just days later, while sitting in the same spot overlooking the valley to the east and Al Qunaytirah to the north, Israeli tanks thundered into town, destroying everything in their path. The mighty Syrian Army retreated, leaving the city and its civilian population defenseless. A blast from an Israeli tank obliterated his family's home, killing his mother and two sisters as they hid, praying for Allah to deliver them from their enemies.

He knew what he had to do. The words of his mother came back to him. "*Move to Damascus, away from the border, away from the hate.*"

It was too late for his family, but not for him. He fled his hometown. He could move away from the border, but hatred was embedded in his being. As he walked along the road towards the great city, the hatred was displaced by a hunger, not for food, but for the blood of his enemies.

On the road to Damascus he met two people who would change his life. Salma Nidal, his future wife, would become his guidepost. Imam Khidir Khadduri, would become his mentor and financier.

July 1982

It had been a good day for Javier Lopez. It was late in the afternoon and not quite as hot in the South Texas desert as it had been earlier. He intended to go straight home and avoid the bars that would siphon his money away. He always managed to keep the majority of his pay from his job tending horses at the Double T Ranch, east of Del Rio. His mother and sister depended on him for support back in La

Purisima, Mexico. Javier worked for an American ranch owner who empathized with the Mexicans who risked their lives crossing the Mexican-U.S. border to find work and support their families. The rancher knew he was taking a risk. If he were caught, he would be prosecuted. It would surely cost him a pretty penny, but he might also get jail time if some judge decided it was time to make an example of someone. But it was possible that most judges had illegals employed as well. It was all a game of chance.

Javier was a hard worker. He spent over sixty hours laboring each week, even though he was only being paid minimum wage for forty hours. He wanted his employer to know that he could depend on him. His mother needed him to survive ever since his father had died in a bar fight in Del Rio. That was another reason Javier steered clear of the local bars. He feared he would end up dead, like his father. Javier didn't want to die at such a young age. After all, at sixteen, he'd barely experienced life. All he knew was hard work and the church. When he wasn't working, his mother insisted he attend church services or help the young priest by working around the rectory.

Javier got a ride to within a mile of the border fence then walked the remaining distance in a dry wash. The area was low and hidden from most anyone's view. He was able to make good time while staying out of sight of the local population. Most folks in the area were tolerant of the Mexicans passing north by morning and south by evening. They understood they were working, doing the jobs that most U.S. citizens wouldn't do. The work was either too hard or didn't pay enough, or both. Either way, it was beneath them.

But the Mexicans would do it. They weren't happy doing the work, but they were happy to get the pay. Even at minimum wage, they could make more in one day in the United States than they could get in nearly a week in Mexico. That was if they could find work at all.

Javier Lopez was one of the lucky ones. He was tired after his long day, but he had his day's pay in his pocket, and he was headed home. Up ahead he saw the ten-foot high fence that had been built years ago on the banks of the Rio Grande. The rust had overtaken the barrier so much it was hardly a fence at all. The reddish-brown, jagged, chain-linked fence was nearly on the ground in places. Years

of men, women, and children climbing over the fence had bent the posts over, even snapping them off in some stretches.

At his favorite crossing point it was still upright, but a large hole had been cut, the links pulled so far apart that several people could walk through it side-by-side. Once through the fence, he had to cross the river then walk another mile and he'd be home. He smiled thinking about a cool bath and a beer. Then he would ask about his mother's day and whether his little sister had studied like she promised.

His sister was really only a half-sister, but he adored her. She was beautiful. And she was smart, very smart. She could read, was good at math, and could already speak both Spanish and English fluently. He told her, *Stay in school, learn something new every day, and move to the United States. There is great opportunity for smart, beautiful women.* She would flash that radiant smile when he said that to her. Even at eight-years old, she was gaining confidence. Javier feared that if he didn't push her, she would never leave this pitiful little town. He'd made it his mission in life to free her from the daily rut of life in poverty.

Still walking along in the dry wash, he was now within fifty feet of the fence. He looked left. *Clear.* He looked right. *Clear.* He looked left again and started towards the fence, walking quickly.

He heard a voice yell in a loud, Texas drawl, "Hey, you! Hold it right there!"

He turned to see a large man in a tan cowboy hat, light green shirt, blue jeans, and boots heading in his direction. The man was about thirty feet away. Javier thought about running, but it was just one man. He was big and probably couldn't run fast. So he decided to wait. But by the time Javier heard the ATVs' motors, it was too late to make a run for it.

Two more men pulled up on ATVs, one blocking his path to the fence, the other blocking his path back to the wash. They were young, probably in their late teens, tanned, like ranch hands. They were also lean and strong.

The big man walked up to Javier, standing very close. He was nearly a head taller than the young Mexican. His face was hard and wrinkled, like he'd spent his whole life in the sun. His mustache was mostly gray with some black mixed in. He had a scar nearly three

inches long just below his left eye, which was nearly shut. The closed eye had a nervous twitch.

For a long moment, nobody said a word. Then the big man rubbed his right hand over his mustache as he looked at the horizon where the sun was making its run for cover. In a gravelly voice he asked no one in particular, "What do we have here?"

No answer.

The man looked at one of the ATV riders then asked, "What does it look like to you, Jeb?"

"Looks like we got us a wetback, Daddy."

"It sure does. A dirty wetback. Takin' our jobs. Stealing our cattle. Gettin' free food. Who knows what else? Probably kidnappin' our women."

The man was so close that Javier could smell the alcohol on the big man's breath. He didn't know what to do. If he tried to make a run for the fence, he'd never make it. What if the man hit him? Should he dare to fight back? He knew he couldn't fight all three men and win. He wasn't a fighter anyway. *Try to reason with them. Try to keep calm.*

Across the river, his little sister waited. She'd come to greet her brother and walk with him the rest of the way home. She had good news to tell him about her day. Her lesson today was about how Mexico used to extend well into what is now the United States. It bothered her that her country had lost the land. But that was history. Maybe someday they would get their land back.

Then she saw her brother standing beyond the fence, surrounded by three men. This confused her. Why was he talking to them? Then she saw the big man point his finger at her brother's chest. Javier didn't raise a hand. Then one of the other men pushed him towards the bigger man. What was happening? She sensed that her brother was in trouble.

One of the men slapped Javier on the back of the head. He raised his hand to rub the spot as he turned to see which one of the men hit him. When he did, one of the other men punched him hard, sending him into the arms of the big man. Javier tried to stay against the man, but he was pushed back to the middle of the circle of angry men. She watched as the men took turns punching her brother until he could no

longer stand. She wanted to yell to him to run, to get away from the bad men.

He fell to the ground. She hoped they would leave him alone now that he was defenseless. Then she saw the first kick from a pointed boot. It hit his right kidney with such force that he arched his back. More kicks followed to his head, stomach, and back. The men continued to kick him long after he lost consciousness.

She screamed Javier's name. She screamed at the men to stop hurting him. They laughed at her.

In those few short minutes, her world shattered as her older brother was beaten to death, his body tossed into the murky waters of the Rio Grande.

Chapter 1

May 28, 1998

Pat McKinney shifted his five-foot seven-inch, one hundred seventy-five pound frame to get more comfortable in the driver's seat. He glanced out the driver's side window of his light green Ford Explorer. The hills of southern Kentucky on either side of Interstate 75 were beautiful in late May, the trees now fully canopied with dark green leaves. The early morning sun angled in from the east, the hilltops casting shadows across long stretches of the four lane highway. Nearly a dozen vultures circled high in the blue sky, searching for that early snack of furry road kill. The few clouds were mere wisps of white, captured in the wide area of high pressure that kept the air in the Midwest warm, dry, and clear.

Pat smiled, thinking he'd come a long way from the hell he'd faced just eight months before. Nightmares had invaded his mind, making sleep difficult; his nights interrupted by frightening scenes conjured up from the depths of his mind. They were always different in some way, but the theme was the same. A former friend, turned business partner, turned enemy popped into his dreams to antagonize him from the grave. Even as Pat saw himself pulling the trigger of a high powered sniper's rifle, the face always laughed at him. Pat thought he'd get the last laugh, but he was wrong. He had tried to shake the dreams on his own, but they worsened. Finally, he succumbed to the realization that he needed help.

He first turned to his wife, Diane. She understood because she knew a little bit about his background. But what she knew was only a small part of the whole story. He would take the rest to his grave. Only three living people knew the whole story, and they each knew their own version. Pat was the only person alive who could understand the hell he faced each unbearable night. The dreams threatened to destroy his life. As he drove north on the interstate, he wondered if he would be able to continue to overcome the mental assault on his psyche.

Over the past eight years he'd faced a number of wicked people, many hell-bent on killing him and harming his family. But he'd faced them all and come out alive. Pat smiled at the thought. There was one very close call, one he would never forget. He still had the remnants of a bruise in the center of his chest that, were it not for a Kevlar vest, would have certainly ended his life.

Without thinking, he lifted his left hand to the scar on the left side of his chin, and began slowly rubbing it with his middle finger. The scar was from a nail that had ricocheted into his chin while building a greenhouse for a former employer. He'd missed hitting the large nail squarely with a hammer. The nail embedded itself over half an inch into his chin. There was no permanent damage except the white scar. If his brother Joe was in the car, he would have slapped Pat's hand away from the scar and told him to stop with the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. He thought Pat's subconscious was hopelessly drawn to the scar. Pat thought it was merely a bad habit.

But it was just Pat and his wife, Diane, on this trip. They'd been on the road for less than two hours, having spent the night north of Knoxville, Tennessee, and Diane was already asleep in the passenger seat. He glanced at his wife, smiled, then looked back at the road. They were climbing higher for the next few miles. They wound up behind a pair of tractor-trailers chugging along, side-by-side, at fifty miles per hour, slowing traffic in both lanes. Normally, this would bother Pat. He wasn't a patient driver, but this trip was different. They were in no hurry. Their plans were to make a stop in New Bremen, Ohio to visit a friend. They then planned to stop in Port Clinton, Ohio, where Pat and Joe were born, and finally, take a grand tour around Lake Superior.

Pat had wanted to drive around the greatest of the Great Lakes since he was a kid. The specter of the

Mackinac Bridge, the wonder of the Sioux Locks, and the beauty of the shore of Lake Superior had always fascinated him. He was surprised when Diane agreed it would be a nice vacation and a great way for Pat to relax.

Pat's brother, Joe, and his fiancé, Lisa, were back in Dunnellon, Florida watching their children. It was Joe and Lisa's anniversary gift to the couple. They all knew Pat needed the time away from any excitement. He was doing well in his therapy. His doctor agreed that a trip away would be perfect, "Just what the doctor ordered" were his words, a lame attempt at humor.

Lisa and Joe had been more than happy to watch the kids. They said it was their warm-up session for the real thing. Lisa was moving slowly, her belly protruding. Their unborn baby girl was safe inside, only about a month away from joining her parents. Their plans were to marry after the baby was born and after Lisa had sufficient time to recover from her pregnancy. Lisa suggested a two month wait. Joe recommended three but wasn't putting up much of a fight. He would go along with whatever Lisa decided. He was as anxious as she was to be married. They'd already bought a house together in Winter Garden, Florida. Besides, they'd lived together for the better part of a year. They figured it was the next logical step. Joe's mother wanted them to marry before their child was born. Lisa's mother figured they were committed to each other and wasn't concerned either way. She felt her daughter had done well in her choice of a lifetime companion.

As Pat's thoughts drifted, he came closer and closer to the tanker truck in front of them. He wasn't dangerously close but when Diane stirred and opened her eyes, she thought they were going to hit the truck. She shouted, "Pat!"

Startled, he jerked his head towards her, took his foot off the accelerator and shouted back, "What? What did I do?" On an uphill angle, the Explorer slowed quickly. Pat had to hit the accelerator again to keep from disrupting the flow of traffic behind them.

"Damn, Honey. You scared the hell out of me." He no longer rubbed his scar, both hands were now firmly on the steering wheel. He was watching straight ahead at the back of the tanker truck, but made quick glances at Diane, who was now wide awake.

"I scared you? I nearly had a heart attack. I thought we were going to latch onto the back of that truck you were so close."

Pat thought that was a bit of an exaggeration. He waited a moment to calm his voice and let his heartbeat slow. "We really weren't that close."

All was quiet in the Ford for several minutes then Pat said, "I was just thinking about Joe and Lisa, and Mom."

"You probably should have been thinking about that truck in front of us," came the reply filled with sarcasm.

They remained silent for several more minutes while Diane looked around at the mountains. She enjoyed the scenery in this part of the country. The beauty of the hills was refreshing, a contrast to the flat, sandy ground found throughout central Florida. The predominant trees around their home in Dunnellon were pines. Palmetto bushes grew wild in most areas that weren't developed. The landscape was far from the majestic beauty of maples, birches, and oak trees that stood before her now. The foliage, intermingled with the rocky formations visible from the highway, enhanced the pleasant scenery.

Diane stretched and twisted, shaking the sleep from her mind. The sleek form of her body didn't go unnoticed by Pat who glanced over at his wife while still trying to concentrate on the traffic ahead. The truck in the passing lane in front of them finally moved into the right lane ahead of the other truck. Pat hit the accelerator, the Explorer's speedometer hitting the seventy-five mile per hour mark. The grade of the road switched from uphill to down. As Pat eased to the right lane in front of the tanker truck, the line of traffic that once trailed them began passing them in rapid succession.

"How far to New Bremen?" Diane was looking at Pat, thinking he had this all calculated out in his mind.

Pat hesitated. "We're about a half hour into Kentucky. It takes about three hours to get through the state and New Bremen's about ten miles off the interstate at exit 102. So I'd say about four hours of actual road time. But we do have to eat somewhere in there."

"Any idea where we might stop? I thought we might get a bite at that coffee shop you talked about."

Pat thought for a minute then suggested, "How about this? Let's get a snack in the next town we come to and we can do a little window shopping. That way we can get into New Bremen about dinner time."

"Amazing. You're not in a hurry to get there and get out? Who are you, and what have you done with my husband?"

Pat smiled. "Hey, this vacation is supposed to be relaxing. There's no reason to hurry. We don't have reservations at any hotels so we can stop when and where we want. The only thing is, I told Frank we'd get to New Bremen sometime this afternoon. He's not expecting us at any certain time, so we can take our time."

Diane looked at Pat and smiled. He really appeared to be relaxed. There was no tension on his face. She was cautiously optimistic he might actually be getting over his nightmares. She reached over with her left hand and stroked his right arm.

It gave Pat goosebumps.

Lisa sat on the floor of the living room in her and Joe's new house. She was playing dolls with Anna McKinney, Pat and Diane's three year old daughter. Anna was a happy little girl with dark brown hair and her mother's dark green eyes. She loved playing dolls with anyone who would join her. Lisa was enjoying the experience with the exception of the discomfort that came with being eight months pregnant. She hoped the baby would be full term. Though Pat and Diane were only supposed to be gone for about two to three weeks, she feared an early delivery might interrupt their trip. It wouldn't be good to go into labor while she and Joe had the responsibility of watching Sean and Anna. The grandmothers, Emma McKinney and Ann Goddard, had already promised they would step in if needed, but Lisa hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

Joe was in the backyard with Sean playing catch with a real baseball. Sean was serious for a kid nearly seven years old. He acted more like an adult than a kid who shouldn't have a worry in the world. The more he learned, the more serious he became.

Sean rarely smiled. He always seemed concerned about one thing or another. Diane used to tell him not to take things so seriously, but it was to no avail. The more Diane tried to get him to just be a six year old, the more he seemed to want to grow up. She told Pat their son took after his Uncle Joe.

Joe McKinney was an intense individual. He fit in very well in the US Marine Corps. Diane admired her brother-in-law, but she preferred her son not follow in his footsteps. Pat said to not worry about him, that he'd grow out of it, but so far, that wasn't happening. Even Pat was starting to worry that his serious attitude might cause emotional problems later in life.

Pat blamed himself for Sean's serious emotional state of mind. When Sean was born, Pat was still in the Navy on the USS *Nevada*, a ballistic missile submarine. At a very young age, Sean would miss his father terribly while he was deployed. The last time Pat came home from sea, Sean was already dreading Pat's eventual departure on the sub again. It took some convincing before he believed his parents that Pat was not going to sea anymore.

As Sean grew, his serious personality became even more intense. When Pat left home for a few nights after an argument with Diane, Sean blamed himself. He thought Pat wasn't coming back. Now, Pat made it a point to tell Sean where he was heading most times when he left the house. Even so, Sean's face would contort into a twist of concern. He just didn't appear to trust his dad at his word.

"Throw one in here, pal. I want you to make my hand sting." From a catcher's crouch Joe encouraged Sean to throw him a fastball. He hoped the exercise would tire him out so he'd sleep well tonight.

Sean stared at his uncle, then went into an exaggerated wind up and threw the ball as hard as he could. Joe had to reach up quickly to grab the ball before it could sail over his head. He grabbed it and tossed it

back to Sean. They'd been at it for about thirty minutes and Sean was ready to call it quits.

He walked towards his uncle, his face scrunched up in a serious look. "Uncle Joe, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. Ask away."

Sean paused for a moment, "Why does Dad have a gun in his desk?"

Joe's brow wrinkled for a moment as he pondered the question. "Well, your mom and dad want to protect you and Anna from bad people."

"Are bad people trying to hurt us?"

Joe crouched down so his face was level with his nephew's. He didn't smile. He wanted Sean to know they were two serious guys having a serious talk.

"Sean, there are bad people in the world. They aren't everywhere, but your mom and dad want to make sure that if they ever do come around here they can protect you and your sister. That's why your dad has a gun."

Sean thought for a second. "I want to help protect Anna and Mom. I think Dad can protect himself, but what if Dad's gone somewhere and bad people show up. I should have a gun."

Joe's face didn't change, but his heart sank then started to rise into his throat. How could he tell this child he shouldn't worry about the "bad people" out there? He tried to think what might be going through the mind of a six-year old boy that would cause him to worry about his family. Hell, he knew *men* who were far less concerned about their family's wellbeing. He thought his eyes would tear up and show weakness, but he steeled himself as he decided what he needed to say.

"Listen, Sean, when the time comes, when you're old enough, I'll teach you how to use a gun. But you have to be older and stronger . . . and we have to have your mom and dad's permission." He gave his nephew a long look. "Is that a deal?"

He held out his hand and took Sean's.

Sean cracked the slightest smile. "Deal." With a firm handshake, the agreement was sealed.

Joe had no idea how he was going to tell his sister-in-law about the promise he'd made. He figured he'd better tell her first before Sean spilled the beans. Joe wasn't worried about having to teach Sean how to handle a gun. He figured Diane would kill him long before Sean's first lesson.