

Chapter One



The entire week was postcard perfect. Unseasonably warm weather continued to bathe the greater Los Angeles area in summerlike conditions. Even though it was the middle of October, it felt like July. Santa Ana winds, blowing in from the desert, pushed the smog toward the ocean, clearing impurities from the sky. Residents and tourists alike paraded up and down the crowded Beverly Hills streets, ducking in and out of boutiques catering to America's wealthiest. But the sedated buzz of excitement on this chamber of commerce-type evening was interrupted by the roar of a Harley weaving its way through the traffic on Rodeo Drive.

He looked like an urban street warrior—greasy hair, tattered long-sleeve T-shirt, a swastika tattooed on the left side of his neck, and the German SS tattooed on the right. Although he wasn't "flying colors"—wearing a leather jacket designating an outlaw motorcycle gang affiliation—no one would question Matt Hogan's credentials. His menacing appearance caught the attention of everyone on the street, and drivers gave him as much leeway as they could provide.

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Hogan's destination on this night was the Mediterranean Enchantment, a favorite restaurant for Beverly Hills' high and mighty. The food was overpriced and not much better than something you could pick up at a local strip mall falafel joint, but "The Enchantment," as it was called by Hollywood aristocracy, had ambiance. What that really meant was rooftop diners with their hookah water pipes and two belly dancers performing hourly to the beat of something from the Baghdad Top 40. As with any Saturday night, the restaurant was crowded with the well dressed and the well favored.

Hogan cruised past The Enchantment's olive green canopy entrance and watched a parking valet take the keys to a car priced higher than Hogan's net worth. He glared at the older Middle Eastern couple exiting the Rolls Royce Phantom. They in turn stared at this unwashed intruder to their elite community. Hogan wouldn't be welcomed at the front door, but that was just fine with him. He couldn't stand the food or the music. Besides, tonight's business was better suited for the back. He raced down the street, took a hard right at the corner and another hard right onto a paved alley leading to the delivery entrance of the restaurant. He parked his bike in the shadows, further concealing his intentions but not his anger. His persona may have been fiction, but his hatred was real.

He marched toward his destination with the determination of a Nazi storm trooper. A reinforced wrought-iron door led directly to a small office located off the kitchen of The Enchantment. Using his steel-toed Doc Martens, Hogan snapped the latch with one powerful front kick.

"What, you don't knock?" asked a wide-eyed Karim Ali Abboud sitting alone at his desk, almost choking on his food.

"Not for you," said Hogan. Then with sarcasm dripping from every word he added, "Nice security lock. Might want to buy American next time. Costs a little more but keeps you safer."

In contrast to the near spotless dining room and kitchen, the office was filthy and smelled of day-old garbage, the result of a trash bin just outside an opened window. A mildewed mop stood in one corner, flanked by dead roaches and rat droppings. Against the wall was a small cluttered desk, three cases of inexpensive wine, and stacks of lunch menus.

The fifty-six-year-old Iraqi was a major financial supporter of radical Islamic causes. Thin-framed, his reedlike arms were adorned with a Rolex watch and a gold bracelet. His “designer everything” clothing was in sharp contrast to the intimidating Hogan—white sinew in his mid-thirties.

“What’s the holdup now, and why isn’t this happening?” demanded Hogan.

“It is. He should be here soon,” whimpered Karim in strongly accented English.

“That’s what you said on the phone an hour ago and three hours before that.” Hogan spit a large chunk of tobacco on the floor, another health-code violation, but even if he cared, Karim was too fearful to protest.

“Please, give it some more time. You Americans are so impatient. Have an appetizer.”

Karim pointed to a plate of dolma and flat bread. Hogan grunted an expletive, picked up a handful of the delicacies and flung them across the small office. Rice, ground lamb, and grape leaves all but covered the tiny room.

A startled Karim rose from his chair, attempting to make his way toward the door to the kitchen.

With a powerful left hand, Hogan grabbed the Iraqi’s boney shoulder and threw him back into his chair.

“Sit down!”

Karim obeyed. “Please, my friend, soon, very soon your product will arrive.”

Both remained silent for a few moments as a tentative calm prevailed. Hogan glowered at a weak Karim who immediately fixed his gaze on the floor. *Machiavelli was right*, thought Hogan, *it is better to be feared than loved*. And Hogan loved being the alpha male.

When that thought passed, Hogan continued to press. “This isn’t the way I do business. If your man can’t produce, then I’m outta here.”

Karim, seeing profit slipping out the back door, pleaded, “You got the sample. My product is good.”

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“Anybody can produce a high-grade taste. It’s quantity my people want.”

Hogan’s people did demand more. The sample of heroin, imported from Afghanistan, graded out at over 90 percent pure. Street level “smack” was 2–3 percent. Karim’s sample was pure poison, instant death, but a small sample was insufficient for Hogan’s purposes. To prove he was a capable supplier, Karim was going to have to produce the kilo Hogan ordered.

“Your people will get quantity and quality.”

“Yeah, but how much longer do I have to wait?”

“You’ll never find better product.”

“Yeah, well you’ll never find greener money or a safer outlet.”

Karim tried to screw up his courage and attempted to respond with conviction. “So you say.”

Hogan liked the feistiness his newfound terrorist friend displayed and accepted the challenge. “Hey, you don’t trust me? Then all I have to do is hop on the hog and blow this camel-jockey slop house.”

Karim backed down immediately. “Give him a little longer.”

“Get him on his cell phone and find out where he’s at. I’ve got people to answer to, and they don’t like waitin’.”

Just as Karim picked up the receiver and punched in the numbers, his associate, Mustafa al-Hamza, walked in from the kitchen carrying a brown leather briefcase.

Mustafa was shorter than Hogan and less developed, but the thirty-four-year-old Saudi was in shape. Although not a citizen, it was apparent he had been seduced by American culture.

Karim gave Mustafa a puzzled look. “How did you get in?”

“Get in what?” said Mustafa with only a slight accent.

“The kitchen . . . my office . . . this restaurant. I thought you’d come through the alley.”

“I came in through the front door.”

“The front door? Don’t you think that is a little obvious?”

“It’s better than sneaking around dark alleys. The more obvious you are, the less obvious you appear. Tonight is business as usual.”

“Not sure how many of your customers carry briefcases to dinner on a Saturday night?” interjected Hogan sizing up Mustafa.

“Mustafa, this is our buyer. He got the sample the other night and liked our product. Tonight he brings us my favorite color . . . green.”

Mustafa locked his attention on Hogan, and the momentary silence was deafening.

Watch his eyes, thought Hogan. A man doesn’t kill with his eyes, but they are a window to intentions. They signal courage, contempt, or fear. But Hogan had to guard his eyes as well. Death was only one mistake away.

“Come on,” demanded Hogan.

Mustafa, still being cautious, asked, “What’s your hurry?”

“What’s my hurry? This was supposed to go down this afternoon, Abdul. Pop it or I’m leaving.”

“Who you callin’ Abdul?”

Hogan’s impatience grew as he glared at Mustafa. “Just open the briefcase. Karim, put a fire under this guy, or I’m outta here.”

Mustafa held his ground. “Somebody better teach this piece of trailer trash a little bit about Middle Eastern culture.”

“Hey, open it or I’m gone.”

Hogan started for the door.

Karim intervened. “Gentlemen, stop it! Mustafa, open it up. We’re here to do business, so quit playing your games.”

Mustafa slowly aligned the numbers on the briefcase’s two combination latch locks. Staring at Hogan with contempt, he released the zinc-plated latches and with all deliberateness opened the briefcase. Turning it, he allowed Hogan to survey its contents.

It was what Hogan had been awaiting since Karim first produced the sample three days ago—a kilogram of heroin wrapped in white plastic and duct tape. When broken into street-level dosages, this package, no larger than a hardback novel, would bring over three million dollars. Hogan’s cost was a mere \$200,000.

Karim beamed. “It’s fresh off the plane, my friend, just like I promised.”

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Hogan reached into the back pocket of his worn jeans and with the speed of a seasoned street fighter flashed the eight-inch blade of a spring-loaded knife. His skilled maneuvering startled even the stoic Mustafa, who instinctively grasped at his belt. Hogan noted the move and realized the Saudi was armed.

“Relax, Abdul. If I wanted to kill you, I would have dropped you before you opened the briefcase.”

Mustafa just glared.

Hogan pulled a small Marquis Reagent heroin test kit, not much larger than a cigarette lighter, from his pocket.

“What’s that?” demanded Mustafa.

“It’s a test kit.”

“A test kit? What are you, some kinda cop?”

Hogan didn’t miss a beat. “Yeah right, and you’re Osama Bin Laden. What? You think this is TV and I pull out a beaker and cook it over an open flame? Get real. I don’t shoot this crap. You wanna stick it in your arm?”

He looked at both Karim and Mustafa. They said nothing. The meek Iraqi restaurant owner stared at the floor. Mustafa, however, maintained eye contact, never wavering.

Hogan then cut a tiny hole through the duct tape and using the tip of the knife blade took a sample of the packaged product. Hogan examined what appeared to be fine textured sand. He moved the knife blade close to his nose and smelled the sample. Then he placed the substance into the clear plastic test kit and sealed it. He methodically broke the three glass vials within the kit and shook the mixture. Holding the kit up to the light, Hogan noted the speed and intensity in which the heroin sample changed color. “Looks good, gentlemen.”

Mustafa tensed. “Let’s see the money.”

“It’s at the bike. Let’s move our business out there.”

Karim stepped in. “No way, my friend. You bring your package here. Our package goes nowhere until we see American currency.”

Hogan casually shrugged his shoulders. “If that’s your play, I’ll be back.”