

CHAPTER ONE

The powerful hand gripped the silenced Russian-made weapon, and the tattooed arm straightened. As the teenager talked to the killer's two associates in the darkened parking lot, she had no idea she was about to be erased by the threat behind her. It was all so impersonal, but career criminals operated on a different plain. Morality was never an issue; expediency was. The Ukrainian girl was a liability and thus expendable.

The ever-constant traffic on Ventura Boulevard masked the sounds of the two muted gunshots fired in rapid succession. From just a few feet away, either shot to the back of the head was fatal. Before anyone exited the rear door to the Russian Veil, the three men threw the limp body into the bed of the pickup truck and were gone: another anonymous victim of Los Angeles street justice, a judicial system lacking due process or fairness. Even a quest for freedom was a capital offense.

MATT HOGAN STOOD IN front of the mirror admiring his greased biker-hair look. His rugged battle-scarred features were in sharp

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contrast to the metrosexuals parading up and down the Sunset Strip on any Saturday evening. The undercover agent then sprayed a 70 percent solution of alcohol on the left side of his powerful neck. He carefully placed the Tinsley transfer, blotted the paper, waited a few seconds, and just as carefully removed the transfer. Satisfied with his work, he finished with a dash of baby powder to aid in drying the large prison-like tattoo. A movie studio German “SS” now complemented the stubble. But even clean shaven, Matt could be a menacing figure, a no-holds-barred, man’s man.

If it’s true, the hotter the fire the stronger the steel, then Hogan was as strong as they came. A member of the FBI’s small cadre of undercover agents, he successfully played the role of contract killer, drug dealer, and when cleaned up, a sophisticated white-collar criminal. A psychologist described him as a “synthesist,” a person who could void himself of his own personality and take on the characteristics, mind-set, and mannerisms of whatever the part required. Matt was good, maybe too good. Sometimes even he questioned who he was.

Working undercover meant more than a fake driver’s license and a fictitious name. It was living life as a liar for hours, days, even months at a time. It meant becoming one of them without becoming one of them. Distance offered detachment, but when you went undercover, it became personal. It was getting close to people you will ultimately betray and probing the darkest side of humanity, including your own. Unlike Hollywood, there were no retakes; a botched line, a missed mark, a mistake could mean instant death. Matt Hogan walked in the flames many times; he experienced the fire.

As he began writing the letters H-A-T-E on the fingers of his right hand, Steve Barnett walked into the Joint Terrorism Task Force locker room.

“Well, if it isn’t the Mary Kay of the FBI,” said Steve. “You enjoy putting on makeup way too much. I hope you aren’t switching sides on me.”

“Don’t ask. Don’t tell,” said Matt concentrating on his artwork.

“Why don’t you just pierce your ear and grow a ponytail, like every other undercover agent I know?”

“Caitlin won’t let me. She’s got a pretty strict dress code around the house. In fact, these biker undercover assignments keep me sleeping on the couch until I take a shower.”

“I guess that’s why she’s been spending so many nights with me at my place.”

“In your dreams big guy. I know for a fact she doesn’t date the follicly challenged with a bad weave.”

Steve pulled out a comb and began to rake his sparse locks styled in a weak comb-over. “That’s how much you know. I’m a Hair Club for Men honor graduate, and she loves to run her fingers through these amber waves.”

Matt didn’t even look up, still writing on his fingers. “I’m surprised you’re awake. Isn’t this way past your bedtime?”

Steve looked in the mirror, moving his face even closer, carefully examining his skin, searching for tell-tale signs of aging, “These late nights are causing all kinds of wrinkles.”

“I’m not sure eight hours of sleep or Mary Kay will help,” said Matt without cracking a smile.

“What about Botox?”

“Yeah, that might fill in a few of those deep crevices around the eyes, but you still don’t have a shot with any skirt rated higher than a three or four.”

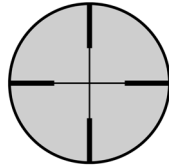
“You’re probably right. I keep hoping my near-perfect shooting scores at the Leisure World pistol range will attract some blue-hair with money, but I’m even striking out there.” Steve paused, turned serious, and then said almost in a whisper, “Dwayne said we’re ready to start the briefing when you are.”

An FBI office is like a locker room with the requisite jock snapping and sarcastic sniping. The thin-skinned need not apply. A sense of humor is almost a requirement, sometimes the sicker the better. Those on the outside would never understand or appreciate

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the need to talk or act the way grown men in law enforcement do. Those in the military understand. Those on the front lines fighting evil know the need. It brings a sense of relief from the tensions the real world throws at you every day, the constant reminders of your mortality. It also brings a sense of camaraderie. You can't count on judges, lawyers, lawmakers, or administrators. Like the combat soldier or Marine, you can only count on the man next to you on the urban battlefield.

Matt blew on his fingers to accelerate the drying time of the ink from the tattoo makeup pen and followed Steve to the room at the end of the long hallway.



CHAPTER TWO

Darkness blanketed the hilltop road. This section of the mountain pass didn't burden taxpayers with streetlights, and only a faint glimmer of illumination from Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley could be seen through the thick, damp fog. It was well past ten, and Lydia Mitchell was hopeful she could make it home by the eleven o'clock news. Her two young daughters would be asleep, and her macho FBI agent husband, exhausted from just a few hours of babysitting, would probably be stretched out on his favorite leather recliner in the family room. Lydia valued her volunteer work at the community food bank. She chaffed, however, at the late-evening committee meetings at various members' homes.

Her husband's Mustang sputtered as she pulled from the Laurel Hills development off Mulholland Drive, and now the car seemed even more irritated as she tried to accelerate up a small rise in the road. The twenty-eight-year-old brunette glanced at the fuel gauge. Of course it registered full; she just filled the tank earlier in the evening. Flip babied his car and always insisted on brand-name gasoline, but Lydia thought his obsession was silly—after all, gas is gas. The local independent dealer a few blocks from her home

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always beat the Mobil and the Shell on opposite corners by several pennies so she filled up, saving nearly ninety-seven cents. Now she wondered if her frugality was a mistake. *Would cheap gas cause all this clanking?* She wasn't looking forward to explaining to her husband why she entrusted his "precious pony" to off-brand fuel.

She rounded the bend of this two-lane road, and a fire team of coyotes greeted her. The animals stopped in the middle of the road, four pairs of eyes glowing in her headlights, and they stared as if telling the Mustang it had no right to be trespassing. When the engine sputtered, the animals raced into the roadside underbrush, giving way to the machine belching its dinner.

Lydia drove another mile, and the car continued to cough, more frequently as the trip progressed. Her efforts at variously giving it more gas and taking her foot off the pedal were ineffective. Eventually it died. She struggled to steer the vehicle to the side of the road, resting it just off the pavement. Frustration began to build.

Fishing through her purse, she found her cell phone lodged at the bottom hidden beneath her wallet, checkbook, and an assortment of cosmetics. She opened the door to activate the dome light, and the alarm signaled the keys were still in the ignition. The annoying sound only added to her frustration. She looked down at the phone pad and, using the speed dial feature, called home, hoping her husband could provide answers and a rescue. Closing the car door to silence the alarm, she waited for the sound of the familiar ring of her home phone. Nothing. She opened the door, the alarm sounded, and she tried again, speed dialing her home number. Her efforts were futile as she realized she was out of her cell phone provider's service area.

"Great!" she muttered, "Now what?"

She knew absolutely nothing about cars, so even raising the hood to examine the engine was a useless gesture. She tried the cell phone one more time but to no avail. The heavy fog was a mist-like

rain, and the windows were quickly covered in moisture, obscuring her visibility even more.

Fear began to envelope her. She was unfamiliar with this section of town and had little idea of where to seek help. Was it safe to start walking in either direction? Maybe a cop would stop to help a stranded motorist, but this seldom-traveled section of the road offered little hope. She couldn't wait here all night. She knew somewhere on this road there were homes, but she could see no lights behind gated entrances. Her friend's home was several miles back. She hated the thought of walking that far in the dampness and the dark. Was it even safe to leave Flip's car? Maybe if she walked a little way in either direction she could at least get cell-phone coverage.

Just as she was about to exit the car, she saw the reflection of headlights in her rearview mirror. A chill ran down her spine. This seemed like a scene from a cheap Hollywood horror movie—a dark, lonely road, and a stranded female who became tomorrow's headline. Always the drama queen, as her husband liked to point out, she tried to squelch her fear.

She took a deep breath and watched the vehicle approach. Her heart began to pound; her palms began to sweat. Should she flag down the motorist? Before she could even decide, the car passed. At first it was a feeling of relief, then confusion, and finally irritation. She was safe but still stranded. As she began to capture a second thought, the car stopped and made a u-turn in the road. She watched the car slowly return. Her heart was almost pounding through her chest, and her hands were shaking.

The vehicle pulled alongside the Mustang. The driver's side window of the dark blue Chrysler 300 retreated into the door frame, and a warm, black face appeared.

Lydia relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief. The driver was Benjamin Hobbs, a minister from a church in Baldwin Hills, who also worked at the food bank and was at tonight's meeting.

“Need some help?”

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“Oh, thank God, it’s you. My car stalled, and I can’t get cell-phone coverage. I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“Let me pull over, and let’s see if I can get it started,” said Ben.

Lydia exited the Mustang as Ben pulled his car to the side of the road, parking near a large tree whose low-hanging branches almost concealed the Chrysler.

A tall, lean man with dark chocolate skin, Ben Hobbs played basketball in college in the mid-eighties. Still athletic, he bounded across the street to Lydia’s car.

“Glad I turned around. I couldn’t see inside the car but wanted to make sure no one was stranded. Course, wanted to be careful, thought I might find a couple attempting to violate the Seventh Commandment.”

Lydia smiled as the mist fell gently on her shoulder-length hair. “I’m glad you took a chance. I think I got some bad gas this evening. My husband insists on brand names, but in the interest of good stewardship, I went cheap, and it may have cost me.”

Ben laughed. “Maybe I can help. I know God wants to reward the wise steward.”

Just as Lydia was about to hand him the keys to the Mustang, she spied a dark Dodge Ram Mega-Cab stop short a hundred yards from her location. She knew it was a Dodge because a similar model sat in her driveway at home. It was her husband’s surveillance vehicle.

Three men exited the truck, grabbed a large limp object from the bed of the pickup, and heaved it over the side of the road. The men quickly returned to the truck and sped off, now heading toward Lydia and Ben, almost clipping them as they stood by the side of the road.

“Crazy kids,” barked Ben.

Before Lydia could respond, the truck skidded to a stop. The driver threw the vehicle into reverse and raced back toward Lydia’s car, tires spinning on the wet, slick pavement, water spitting in all directions. Three men jumped from the truck.

The driver was short and powerful. His head was shaved, and Lydia could see a tattoo on the left side of his neck. The other two were much taller, one muscular but both menacing, wearing dark knit caps, which they immediately pulled down over their faces as they exited the muddied pickup. Both arms of the largest of the three were covered in tattoos. The other wore a long-sleeve black Harley-Davidson shirt which would have concealed any markings.

Initially paralyzed with fear, Lydia stood by as the men moved with ferocious speed toward Benjamin Hobbs. She then screamed as the three men attacked and began to pummel Ben with their fists and feet. She watched as the minister attempted to fend them off, but following a blow to the windpipe, he quickly collapsed. The kicks were made with blinding speed; steel-toed Doc Marten boots their weapons of choice.

Ben curled his body into a fetal position, unable to protest, craving a breath, and attempting to ward off the blows.

Lydia's pleas for the men to stop fell on deaf ears; they evidenced no intention of stopping. She tried to intervene, grabbing the driver by the arm, but he used his free arm landing a devastating punch to her face, shattering her nose.

The men were too quick, too powerful, too many. When the driver's left foot landed a well-placed strike to the head, Ben's body went limp.

The brutal, random, and spontaneous assault took less than a minute. The largest of the three men grabbed a silenced 9 mm from his waistband and pumped two shots into the minister's dead body. He then walked over to Lydia and fired two more rounds.