



HEROES OF QUANTICO

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

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His quarry was late.

Very late.

Shading his eyes, the man scanned the deserted jogging path and shifted the rifle cradled in his arms. He couldn't linger much longer without risking detection. In the past couple of hours he'd already seen a few too many runners and dog walkers, despite the oppressive August heat. But no one had yet ventured anywhere near his concealed position in the woods at the edge of the park.

After studying his quarry's habits, he'd chosen the time and place with care. And he'd walked through the exercise dozens of times in his mind. Park behind the First Congregational Church, unoccupied on this sultry St. Louis Saturday. Leave the car at the far end of the isolated parking lot, next to the woods that separated church property from the park. Cut through the dense thicket. Wait for his target. Take his shot. Return to the car, slide the rifle back inside the weed-eater box on the back seat. Drive home. Dispose of the gun.

He stroked the sleek steel barrel, the taste of regret sharp on his tongue. He hated the thought of destroying his favorite hunting rifle. But hanging on to it once this job was finished would be too dangerous. His only consolation was that it would end its life doing God's work.

Shifting his position, he lifted his arm and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his dark green shirt. Then

he turned to scan the empty church parking lot barely visible through the shrubby undergrowth beneath the trees. He hadn't sought out a house of God as his staging area, but it was fitting. For he was here to follow a directive from the Good Book. To claim an eye for an eye.

And if his quarry didn't show today . . . he'd find another time to carry out his mission.

Ten minutes later, as he was about to scrap his plans and head back to his car, his patience was rewarded. A surge of adrenaline shot through him as his target appeared in the distance. He wiped his damp palms on his slacks. Closed his eyes.

Jesus, guide my aim as I do your work.

Exchanging his cotton gloves for a pair in snug-fitting latex, he lifted the rifle. Fitted the stock against his shoulder. Pinned the figure in his crosshairs.

And waited.

There was no need to rush. He could do the job at 150 yards, but why not wait until a hundred? The closer the target, the better the odds he could finish this in one shot.

Either way, in three minutes, max, the score would be settled. Justice would be done.

Timing and patience were everything—whether hunting animals or people.



Warmth rose in shimmering waves from the asphalt jogging path, the humidity already stifling at eight o'clock in the morning. A trickle of sweat headed south between Mark Sanders's shoulder blades, while another tracked down his temple. Without breaking rhythm or slowing his pace, he tilted his head and lifted his arm to wipe the sleeve of his T-shirt across his forehead. The heat was bad, but he'd endured far hotter conditions. A

sweltering St. Louis August was no worse than Afghanistan or Iraq or Colombia. And it was far safer.

Safety, however, was a relative term. And he never took it for granted.

Scrutinizing the terrain as he ran, he remained alert for anything out of the ordinary. That drill—an on-the-job necessity—had become a habit in his personal life as well. But the peaceful suburban park gave him little cause for concern. The place was deserted, the typical Saturday crowd sleeping in, lingering over a second cup of coffee or hibernating in air-conditioning.

Forty-five minutes ago, as he'd downed a quick glass of juice, Mark had been tempted to follow their lead. Now he was glad he hadn't. Despite the heat, it felt good to run. To be *able* to run. Three months ago, when the bullet had ripped through his leg, he hadn't been sure he'd ever use his jogging shoes again. But thanks to a great surgeon and intensive rehab, he was well on the road to a full recovery. And his short-term assignment to the understaffed St. Louis office, which had liberated him from the torture of temporary desk duty, had been a godsend. In another month, he should be physically ready to rejoin his team in Quantico.

As for mental readiness—that was another question.

Images from the final, fateful moments in the quick shop invaded his consciousness with the ruthless tenacity of an insidious cancer, twisting his gut into a tight, painful knot. As the familiar bleakness settled over him, Mark knew he had to find a way to stop rehashing a past he couldn't change. To stop second-guessing himself, wondering if there was anything he could have done to prevent the tragedy. The testimony of his partner and witnesses had confirmed he'd followed protocol. The security video had backed that up. Despite the media scrutiny and public outcry, the review board had cleared him of wrongdoing.

Yet nothing changed the bottom line.

He bore full responsibility for the death of an innocent teen.

The bullet had come from his gun.

As a result, for the first time in his twelve years with the FBI, he felt like one of the bad guys instead of one of the good guys.

Until he got past that, Mark knew he couldn't rejoin the Hostage Rescue Team. He respected his colleagues too much to put them at risk. They were among the most highly trained and best-equipped tactical personnel in the world, and they didn't need an operator in their midst whose confidence was anything less than rock solid. The life-and-death situations they dealt with required instant decisions, and Mark wasn't certain he could deliver on that. Not yet, anyway. And neither was the counselor he'd been required to talk with after the shooting.

In the interim, he'd figured the job in St. Louis would be quiet enough—relative to his usual duties—to give him a chance to regain his perspective. He'd been here six weeks; he had four to go. By then, he should be ready to go back to Quantico. Physically and mentally.

At least he hoped so.

At the moment, however, he needed a distraction from his unsettling thoughts. And the attractive woman who'd appeared in the distance provided one as she strode toward him.

Mark slowed a bit, forcibly compartmentalizing his morose musings as he enjoyed the smooth, easy grace of her stride, the long length of leg showing beneath her hot pink running shorts, the wide expanse of golden skin displayed above her white tank top. Despite the heat, she was walking at a good clip, her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, a becoming flush on her cheeks.

Not a bad view for a Saturday morning.

He tried to tame the appreciative grin that tugged at his lips,

glad his reflective sunglasses hid his eyes. If he wasn't careful, she'd catch him ogling her.

As the distance separating them narrowed, Mark shifted his attention to her face. And reduced his speed again. She looked familiar. He was sure he'd seen her before. But where?

And then it registered.

Emily Lawson.

Two decades had elapsed since their parting, but he'd studied enough age-enhanced images to get a feel for how people looked after the passage of years. And in truth, her appearance wasn't that much different, once you got past the cosmetic changes. Her once-long hair had been cropped to shoulder length, and her angular adolescent build had softened into an appealing womanliness, but her features were the same. Stunning green eyes, classic high cheekbones, firm chin, and supple, expressive lips.

His gaze lingered on her lips.

A guy didn't forget his first kiss.

He stopped as she prepared to pass him, his restrained grin broadening into a smile.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I believe we've met. Emily Lawson, right?"

The woman's step faltered as she shot him a startled glance. Easing away from him, she rubbed her palms on her shorts. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I know you."

If Mark had had any doubts about the woman's identity, they vanished as soon as she spoke. Her distinctive voice, rich and smooth as warm honey, hadn't changed one iota.

His smile still in place, Mark removed his sunglasses. "I suppose time hasn't been as kind to me as it has been to you. You've hardly changed in twenty years. But I could never forget the first girl I kissed."

Emily's mouth dropped open. "Mark Sanders?"

“Guilty.”

“I don’t believe this!” Her posture relaxed, and her lips tipped up into a delighted smile as she propped her hands on her hips. “What in the world are you doing here?”



Frowning in irritation, the man lowered the rifle a few inches and surveyed the scene. Intent on keeping his quarry in his crosshairs, he hadn’t noticed the second person approaching. Now the two of them were engaged in an animated conversation.

At least no one else was in this section of the park yet, he confirmed with a quick scan. He’d prefer to do this with no witnesses, but it didn’t much matter if his target had a companion. He’d be long gone before the police arrived.

Hurting an innocent person, however, wouldn’t be right. He needed to wait for a clean line of sight. A slight shift in their positions was all it would take, and that could happen at any moment.

Fitting the stock snug against his shoulder, he once more aligned his quarry in his scope.



“I’m on temporary assignment in St. Louis.” Mark folded his arms across his chest and smiled as he answered Emily’s question. “I’ll be here for another four weeks.”

“Where’s home?”

“My mailing address is Quantico, Virginia. But I don’t spend much time there.”

“Quantico.” She tilted her head and gave him a speculative look. “Let me guess. FBI.”

He arched an eyebrow. "Not bad."

"Deductive reasoning." Grinning, she ticked off the clues on her fingers. "A, you were very interested in law in high school, and law enforcement is a practical application of that. B, you always liked to be in the middle of the action. C, Quantico's claim to fame is FBI headquarters. And D . . . you always were one of the good guys."

At her last comment, his smile seemed to dim a few watts, she noted. Curious.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence. What about you? How did you end up in St. Louis? And what are you doing these days?"

"I got my PhD here, and since I liked the city, I stayed and opened a practice. I'm a clinical psychologist."

"I seem to recall that even as a teenager you enjoyed trying to figure out what made people tick." His tone was teasing, but his expression told her he was impressed. "I suppose I'd better be careful what I say. I wouldn't want to reveal any classified information."

She gave him a skeptical look. "I have a feeling my interrogation skills would pale in comparison to your ability to deflect questions. There's probably a whole course in verbal judo for FBI agents."

He chuckled. "Why don't we put that to the test? I don't know about you, but I've had it with the heat. How about sharing a cold drink somewhere and catching up?"

Emily regarded the man beside her, intrigued by the invitation. And tempted. The lanky seventeen-year-old she remembered had matured into a virile man with a powerful presence. At six-foot plus, he was an imposing figure, with long, muscular legs, broad shoulders, calendar-quality abs and pecs, and biceps to die for. The subtle character lines in his face were new, as were the subtle glints of silver in the dark brown hair at his temples. But the tiny dimple in his cheek when he grinned, the strong jaw

line, the ever-so-slight crook in his nose—all of those nuances were the same. As were the deep-brown eyes and that quirk in his lips when he smiled. Sweet memories of their long-ago summertime romance in Tennessee stirred, tugging at her heart.

No doubt about it. Her quiet Saturday had just gotten a whole lot more interesting.

“I could be persuaded. I’ve been fantasizing about a double chocolate chip frappuccino for the past few minutes. But I can’t go anywhere like this.” She looked down at her limp attire. “I need to be hosed down first. Or better yet, take a cold shower.”

“I could use a cold shower myself.” His lips lifted into a lazy smile as he gave her a slow, appreciative perusal.

Emily felt the flush on her cheeks deepen. “Mark Sanders! Are you flirting with me?”

“I plead the fifth. But just to cover my back, is there a husband I should be concerned about?” His gaze flicked to her ringless left hand.

Her smile faded, and with it her lighthearted mood. “Not anymore. I lost him five years ago, less than six months after we were married. Grant was a firefighter. He died in the line of duty.”

He let out a slow breath. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I. He was a good man.” She swallowed and summoned up her smile again. “How about you, Mark? Do you have a wife back in Quantico?”

“No. My career hasn’t been conducive to long-term relationships.”

“Just short-term ones, hmm?” She switched back to banter mode, hoping that would help ease the ache in her heart that memories of Grant always stirred up.

“I think I’m going to employ those verbal judo techniques you mentioned. How about we settle on a time for that cold drink?”

“Evading my question, huh?”

With a chuckle, he lifted his arm to check his watch. “No comment.”

As he angled away from her to shade the face of his timepiece from the sun, a persistent yellow jacket buzzed her. Sidestepping it, she flapped her hand to shoo it away.

“The bees are bad this summer—”

The distinctive crack of a rifle shot shattered the early morning stillness, cutting her off in midsentence.

The next thing she knew, Mark lunged at her, taking her to the ground with a powerful thrust.

As her body slammed against the unforgiving pavement, the bizarre reality slammed into her with equal force.

Someone was shooting at them.



His adrenaline surging, Mark shielded Emily with his body as he scanned the area. They needed cover.

Fast.

A stone bench stood a few yards away. In the other direction, a grouping of boulders behind a flower garden offered more protection. Neither option was optimal. But they were the only barriers available to put between them and the shooter.

Without loosening his grip on Emily, Mark half rolled, half dragged them behind the bench as another shot rang out. He felt the vapor bulge of the bullet—a lethal whisper against his cheek that was far too close for comfort—before it chipped the concrete corner of the seat, shattering it into rough shards.

Hoping the backless bench wasn't anchored to the ground, he wrapped his fingers around the top edge and pushed.

Nothing.

Exerting as much force as possible, he tried again, his muscles

straining. To his relief, the bench tipped. He kept a tight grip as it fell to ensure it didn't turn upside down and leave them exposed. A metallic reflection in the wooded area at the perimeter of the park caught his attention an instant before the bench blocked his view.

"Curl up and stay down, Emily."

He barked out the order as he edged her in tight behind the concrete barricade and tucked himself beside her.

He took another look at the boulders, which would offer more substantial cover, calculating his chances of getting them both there alive.

Not good, he concluded.

The shooter's aim was too accurate.

Unarmed, he had no defense except to lay low and hope help arrived before the sniper found a position that would give him a cleaner line of sight.

On the positive side, he had his phone. And the stand of trees on the far side of the adjacent baseball field, where he pegged the shooter to be hiding, gave way to more open ground on each side—backyards of homes in the residential neighborhood bordering that side of the park. The man's mobility was limited if he wanted to remain hidden.

It wasn't much of an advantage, but he'd take it.

Pulling out his BlackBerry, he jabbed in 911. As soon as the dispatcher answered, he gave her a rapid-fire download.

"This is Special Agent Mark Sanders with the FBI. I'm in Hardin Park in Oakdale, and I have an active shooter on the east perimeter in the woods. I'm not armed. I've taken cover behind an overturned bench, but I need backup as fast as you can get it here."

"Is the shooter still firing?"

"Nothing since the first two shots."

"Any casualties?"

In his automatic response to the gunshot, Mark had taken Emily down hard. On some instinctive level he'd tried to absorb the brunt of the fall, but he didn't think he'd succeeded. Pressed close against her, he could feel her shuddering, and her breath was coming in shallow gasps. "My friend may need some assistance. Hang on."

Taking one more sweeping survey of his surroundings, he shifted and spoke in her ear.

"Emily, are you okay?"

No response.

"Emily?"

Silence.

Scanning the deserted park and woods once more, Mark eased back as much as he dared. If the shooter was still out there, he would be waiting for an opportunity to take another shot. But in light of the approaching police sirens, Mark's gut told him the man had already disappeared.

And he was certain it was a man. Most shooters of this type were.

Emily was curled into a ball on the asphalt, facing him. Her hair had come out of its elastic band to spill across her face, and with gentle fingers he brushed it aside. Her dazed eyes were open, and there was an abrasion on her cheek—a souvenir of her slide across the rough asphalt. But it was her pallor that alarmed him.

She blinked once, twice, and reached out a shaky hand toward his shirt.

"Blood." The word came out in a weak whisper.

He looked down. She was right. The large, red stain on his gray T-shirt was blood.

But it wasn't his.

His alarm escalating, Mark eased back another couple of inches and gave her a swift, comprehensive scan. She had a

skinned knee, but that wouldn't account for the blood on his shirt.

Setting the BlackBerry on the ground, he rolled her toward him to check behind her—and found the source of the blood.

As his breath hissed out between his teeth, he grabbed the phone.

“We do have a casualty. The woman I'm with has been hit.”