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HEROES OF QUANTICO

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HEROES OF QUANTICO

# AGAINST ALL ODDS

IRENE HANNON



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## PROLOGUE

“Sir? I think you need to hear this.”

With a preoccupied frown, David Callahan looked up from the security briefing in his hand. His aide, Salam Farah, stood on the threshold of his small office deep inside the fortified U.S. Embassy compound in Kabul, Afghanistan. The man was holding a tape recorder and a single sheet of paper.

“A new message from the terrorists?” David lowered the briefing to his desk.

“Yes. And another personal threat.”

“I’m not interested in threats directed at me.” David waved the comment aside. “Let our security people worry about them.”

“This one is different, sir.”

After forty years in the diplomatic service, most of them spent dealing with volatile situations in the world’s hot spots, David had learned to trust his instincts about people. And in the two months he’d been back in Afghanistan trying to help stabilize the local government, he’d come to respect Salam’s judgment. His aide wouldn’t raise a red flag unless there was good cause.

“All right.” David adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses and held out his hand. “Let’s see what they have to say.”

In silence, Salam set the recorder on the desk, pressed the play button, and passed the sheet of paper to David.

As the spoken message was relayed in Pashto, the language favored by the Taliban, David scanned the translation. The warning was similar to those that had come before: convince the

country's struggling fledgling government to release a dozen incarcerated terrorists and pay a twenty-million-dollar ransom, or the three U.S. hostages that had been kidnapped a week ago would die.

But as he read the last line, he understood Salam's concern. The nature of the personal threat had, indeed, changed.

*If you do not convince the government to meet our demands, your daughter will be our next target.*

His pulse slammed into high gear.

"When did this arrive?" A thread of tension wove through his clipped question.

"Half an hour ago. It's been in translation."

"Was it delivered in the usual manner?"

"Yes."

Meaning a randomly selected seven- or eight-year-old boy had been paid a few afghanis—the equivalent of a dime—to thrust the tape into the hands of the first U.S. soldier he saw at busy Massood Square, not far from the main gate of the embassy. The young, nimble couriers always managed to slip into the crowd or dart through the traffic before they could be restrained. It was a simple, expedient delivery method that left no clue about the origin of the messages.

Swiveling toward the small window in his office, David considered his options.

The official stance from Washington was clear—the United States didn't negotiate with terrorists. Nevertheless, secret deals were sometimes bartered that allowed the government to save hostages while maintaining its hard-line public stance. While he'd been assigned to broker a couple of those clandestine arrangements during his career, David had never recommended that course of action. Had never even considered recommending it.

Until now.

Because he wanted to protect Monica—even if she wanted nothing to do with him.

As he stared out the window at the jagged, unforgiving peaks of the distant Hindu Kush Mountains, snow-covered on this frigid February day, he was keenly aware of the moral dilemma he faced. If he'd been unwilling to advise covert bargaining to save the lives of the three American hostages, how could he in good conscience change his stance now just because his own daughter had become a target?

Whoever had masterminded this latest threat had thrown him a cunning, world-class curveball.

For thirty eternal seconds he wrestled with his dilemma. But when he swung back toward Salam, there was steel in his voice.

“Get Washington on the phone.”

# 1

Evan Cooper had never liked predawn pages.

In his four years on the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, he'd pulled his share of all-nighters. And those were fine. He'd much rather stay up until the sun rose than be awakened by that rude alert. Especially on a Saturday after a late night of partying.

Stifling a groan, he groped around the top of his nightstand until his fingers closed over his BlackBerry. Once he'd killed the piercing noise, he peered at his watch in the darkness, forcing his bleary eyes to focus. According to the LED dial, it was four in the morning. Two hours of sleep.

Not enough.

Resigned, Coop clicked on his in-box. Normally, his adrenaline would already be pumping as he speculated about what crisis had escalated to the point that the nation's most elite civilian tactical force would be called in. But in his present condition, the address line did little more than arouse mild curiosity in his sleep-fogged brain. Why had the page been directed to him alone rather than to his full team, as usual?

Squinting in the dark, Coop scanned the clipped directive from Les Coplin, head of the HRT.

*Meet me at Quantico ASAP.*

No explanation. No clue about why this meeting couldn't wait until a decent hour. Just a summons.

In other words, typical Les.

After four years of this drill, Coop simply shifted into auto-

pilot. And thirty minutes later, he found himself striding down the too-bright corridor toward Les's office with no actual recollection of getting dressed, driving to Quantico, going through security, or parking his car.

It was almost scary.

"You look about as alert as I feel."

At the wry comment, Coop glanced over his shoulder. Mark Sanders closed the distance between them in a few long strides and fell into step beside him.

"One too many beers last night?" Mark queried.

"At least." Coop didn't figure it would do any good to deny the obvious. Mark had been by his side most of the evening. "I take it you got a page too?"

"Yep." He scanned the deserted hallway. "Looks like it's just you and me, kid. A two-man job. This might be interesting."

*Maybe, Coop conceded. After I wake up.*

"How come you're so perky?" Coop gave Mark a suspicious look. The two of them were often teamed up on missions that called for partners, and their on-the-job pairing had led to a solid friendship. "You had as much to drink as I did."

"I also stopped for a cup of coffee at the quick shop on the way in."

"Smart."

"I thought so." Mark's lips quirked into a smirk. "Hey, maybe Les will take pity on you and offer you some of his special brew."

The commander's thick-as-motor-oil sludge was legendary—and universally abhorred. But Coop was desperate. "I might take him up on it."

"Whoa!" Mark's eyebrows shot up. "You did have a rough night. Or else you're getting old."

"Thanks a lot, buddy." In truth, he felt every one of his thirty-eight years this morning.

Chuckling, Mark stopped outside Les's office and slapped Coop on the back. "Hey, what are friends for?" He lifted his hand to knock but froze as a gruff voice bellowed through the door.

"Don't just stand there. Come on in!"

Rolling his eyes, Mark pushed the door open and stepped aside, ushering Coop in first.

"Now you decide to be polite," Coop muttered under his breath as he passed.

Mark's soft chuckle was the only response.

"Sit." Les waved them into chairs and fished out some file folders from the sea of papers on his desk. He worked the stub of his ever-present, unlit cigar between his teeth as he scrutinized the men across from him.

"You two look like something the cat dragged in." He turned to Coop. "Especially you. Get some caffeine." He motioned to a coffeemaker on a small table against the wall.

After exchanging a look with Mark, Coop rose in silence and filled a disposable cup three-quarters full, stirring in two packets of creamer to cut the bitterness of the noxious swill that masqueraded as coffee. Nothing got past Les, Coop reflected. One quick, assessing glance was all it had taken for the man to figure out who had fared the worse from a night of barhopping.

His astute powers of observation were no surprise, though. A former green beret and HRT operator, Les had headed the Hostage Rescue Team for the past two years. And he'd earned the respect of every HRT member with his keen insights and cut-to-the-chase manner. He'd also earned the nickname Bulldog, thanks to his stocky build, close-cropped gray hair, and square jaw—not to mention his tenacious determination.

As Coop retook his seat, grimacing at his first sip of the vile brew, he ignored the twitch in Mark's lips and focused on Les.

"I've got a job for you two. Ever hear of David Callahan?"

Mark shot Coop a silent query. At the almost impercepti-

ble shake of his partner's head, he answered for both of them. "No."

"Didn't think so. He keeps a low profile. Here's some background you can review later." He tossed a file across the desk, and Coop fumbled with his coffee as he grabbed for it, the murky liquid sloshing dangerously close to the rim of the cup.

Les scowled at him and chewed his cigar. "Keep drinking that coffee." Settling back in his chair, he ignored the flush that rose on Coop's neck. "David Callahan works for the State Department. Has for forty years. He's been in about every hot spot in the world where the United States has a vested interest. By reputation, he's a savvy diplomat and a tough but fair negotiator. When you see the secretary of state shaking hands with foreign leaders after a diplomatic coup, you can bet David Callahan had a hand in it. I assume you're both versed on the current hostage situation in Afghanistan."

It was a statement, not a question.

To Coop's relief, Mark took pity on him and accepted the volley. The coffee was starting to work, but he wasn't yet ready to dive into this game.

"Yes. The basics, anyway. An unidentified terrorist group kidnapped three Americans a week ago and is demanding the release of a number of extremists who are in custody, as well as a large ransom. The hostages are a wire service reporter, the director of a humanitarian organization, and a State Department employee. The last I heard, things were at a stalemate."

"That's right. It's a dicey situation. Callahan is holding firm to our nonnegotiation policy with terrorists, but he's facing immense pressure to convince the State Department and the Afghan government to reconsider that stance. And the terrorists just raised the stakes."

Leaning forward, Les passed a file to Mark. "Background on Monica Callahan, David's daughter."

“How is she involved?” Mark took the file.

“She isn’t. Yet. And it’s up to you to keep it that way.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” Twin creases appeared on Mark’s brow.

“Three hours ago, the terrorists gave David Callahan a vested interest in the outcome by threatening his daughter.” Les turned to Coop. “You with us?”

“Yes, sir. But I’m not sure I understand, either. Shouldn’t this be handled by State Department personnel?”

“In general, yes. David Callahan’s own security is being managed internally. But he wanted the best available protection for his daughter. And he went to the highest levels to get it.”

“The secretary of state asked for HRT involvement?” Mark sent Les a surprised look.

“No one *asked* for anything. It was an order.” Les chewed on his cigar for a few seconds. “And it came from the White House.”

Stunned, Coop stared at him. “The White House?”

“The coffee must be kicking in. Good.” Les worked his cigar to the other side of his mouth. “Now that I have your full attention, we can talk about your assignment.”

“Is the daughter in Afghanistan?” Mark asked.

“No. Much closer to home. Richmond, Virginia. I want you and Coop on dignitary protection duty 24/7 until this hostage situation is resolved.”

“That could be weeks,” Coop said.

“And your point is . . .” Les pinned him with a piercing look.

Coop took a fortifying gulp of his coffee and remained silent.

“That’s what I figured.” Les removed his cigar long enough to take a swig from his own mug. “We’ll work the intelligence angle from here and try to intercept any imminent threats. I need you two on the ground with Monica Callahan to provide physical

protection.” He passed another file over to Mark. “Classified intelligence on the hostage situation and terrorist cells in the U.S. that could be connected to it.”

“Is a safe house being arranged?”

At Mark’s question, Les leaned back in his chair and squinted. Not a good sign, Coop knew. Their boss only squinted in tense situations—or if things weren’t going as planned.

“That would be the most effective way to deal with the situation. And we’re securing a location now. But we have a challenge to deal with first.”

As Coop leaned forward to wedge his coffee cup into a tiny bare spot on Les’s desk, he exchanged a glance with Mark. His partner’s concerned expression mirrored Coop’s reaction. When Les said “challenge,” he meant “problem.” And with the White House watching over their shoulders, problems were not a good thing.

“I’m assuming you’ll explain that.” Coop’s even, controlled tone reflected none of his sudden unease.

“The lady isn’t aware of the danger because she hasn’t responded to her father’s calls. As you’ll discover from her file, they’ve been estranged for many years.” Les delivered his bombshell matter-of-factly. “So your first challenge, gentlemen, will be to convince her she needs protecting and get her on board with the program—despite her feelings about her father.”

The last vestiges of fuzziness vanished from Coop’s brain. They were supposed to protect an uncooperative subject from a terrorist threat with the White House looking over their shoulders.

Wonderful.

From the set of his jaw, Mark wasn’t any more thrilled by the assignment than he was, Coop deduced.

Dignitary protection details were bad enough under the best conditions. No one on the HRT had joined the group to play

nursemaid to high-powered, pampered VIPs. And that's what these gigs amounted to in most cases, as he and Mark knew firsthand. You stashed the person in a safe house and babysat until you got the all clear.

In other words, you were bored out of your mind.

But he'd take that kind of assignment in a heartbeat compared to the one Les had handed them. One wrong step, and their careers would be toast.

"We'll feed you intelligence as we get it," Les continued. "And we'll proceed on the assumption that you'll convince Ms. Callahan it's in her best interest to cooperate. In the meantime, get up to speed on those files and head down to Richmond. I want you on the job by nine o'clock. The local field office is handling covert surveillance until you get there. Any questions?"

Coop and Mark exchanged a look but remained silent.

"Okay. Stay in touch. And good luck."

Rising, Coop gripped the file folder on David Callahan and picked up his coffee. As he followed Mark out the door, he glanced at the murky dregs sloshing in the bottom of the cup. They turned his stomach.

And the assignment Les had handed them was having the same effect.

As for luck . . . he had a feeling they were going to need a whole lot more than that to emerge from this job unscathed.