

## A TOUCH OF REVENGE

by Gary Ponzo

The bullet left the sniper's rifle at 3,000 feet per second. Unfortunately, Nick Bracco didn't hear the shot until it was too late. He was sitting on his back porch staring at a pregnancy test his wife had just handed him. It was positive. After eight long years their dream of raising a child was about to come true.

Those plans were made long before the sniper's bullet made it halfway across the small, calm lake sitting in their backyard. It was the same lake that lured them to into buying the mature cabin. After years of city living they'd decided to move to northern Arizona and breathe the mountain air.

As the bullet cleared the lake, Nick was focusing on the positive line of the pregnancy test and imagining what it would be like to be a father. Until recently he'd never allowed himself the luxury of relishing the concept. As the head of the FBI's terrorist task force he wasn't sure he'd even survive long enough. Now, though, he beamed with pride. Nick had complied with his wife's desires to get out of harm's way. He left the bureau to become a small town sheriff and raise a family. The happy couple had reached the pinnacle of their dreams.

That's when the bullet hit him in the chest.

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FBI Agent Matt McColm heard the gunshot from a mile away. Before his new partner and girlfriend, Jennifer Steele, knew which direction it came from, Matt knew it was a Remington 700 sniper rifle. He also knew the target.

“Hunters?” Steele asked.

“That’s no hunter,” Matt said. They were heading down a dirt path on mountain bikes. He twisted his bike around and hustled down the narrow trail toward the source of the shot.

“How do you know?” Steele pumped her legs hard to keep up.

Matt wanted to say, “Because I’ve been dreading this day.” Instead, he pointed to an opening to the right while he veered left. “Go back to the Bracco’s cabin,” he said. “And call for an ambulance.”

Her tires spewed dirt as she sped away.

Matt pulled up on the handlebars and forced his torso down into a rhythm with the stride of his long legs. As he passed the lake to his right, Julie Bracco’s wail carried over the water like a wounded animal. There were no trees to buffer the helplessness of her howl. Matt knew Steele was qualified to handle the situation at the cabin. Nick Bracco was probably dead and the thought made him pump even harder. His job now was pure revenge.

Matt realized he could be heading into a sniper’s lair, but he banked on the sniper retreating. Adrenalin surged through his bloodstream as he dodged low-hanging limbs and made hairpin turns on the sliver of dirt between the pines. He put the shot at 500 yards to Nick’s cabin. There was very little wind. Good shooting weather. From that distance a sniper should get within five inches. The average human head is ten inches. Matt prayed it wasn’t a head shot.

As he flew over a rise in the path, gunshots exploded all around him. He dove from the bike and slammed headfirst into a pine tree. When he opened his eyes, he was staring straight up

into a fuzzy group of treetops. As his vision cleared, he touched his forehead and felt a knot growing already. His fingers came back gooey red. That's when his Special Forces training kicked in. He took deep breaths and tried to sort things out. There were three shots. Four including the shot at Nick. The full magazine of a Remington 700. The sniper had to be reloading.

The sniper had been impetuous and it was the only reason Matt was still breathing. You don't unload your weapon on a moving target unless it's moving out of range. If the sniper were experienced, he would have used one shot to immobilize Matt, then the other two to finish him off.

Matt rolled to his side and crawled behind a tree. He knew more about a Remington 700 than anyone on the planet. After all, he was the FBI's current sharp-shooting champion. The sniper was using the 7mm Magnum bullet instead of the .308 caliber. There was a distinct difference in the sound which is how he knew the sniper had only four bullets. The .308 caliber held five. The sniper didn't know about his expertise and Matt was prepared to take full advantage of his ignorance.

Matt pulled his Slimline Glock from the holster under his tee shirt. Fully loaded, it held twenty rounds. "I'm all in," he whispered.

A shot blasted just under his right foot and ricocheted over his shoe. Matt quickly tucked in his thin frame and moved farther left with his back to the tree. He ripped off his bright orange shirt. It was worn to stand out for hunters, not snipers.

A second shot blew away the side of the tree spraying shards of wood across his face. Matt spit out wood fragments and readjusted his position. The shooter was close, inside a

hundred yards. The sound of the bullets breaking the sound barrier echoed throughout the forest and brought a creepy urban feel to an otherwise serene mountainside.

Matt knew more than just the weapon the sniper was using, he knew the organization he belonged to as well. Matt and Nick had chased terrorists for a decade with the bureau. During their final mission together, Nick had finished off the leader of the Kurdish Security Force. Matt had always feared someone from the KSF would go after Nick, even after he'd resigned and became sheriff of the Arizona mountain community.

Now, Matt waited behind a pine tree and counted bullets. He needed to use the sniper's impatience against him. He grabbed his shirt and quickly stuffed it with loose leaves and pine needles, then tied the bottom into a knot.

A third shot whizzed past. Close. The one vulnerability of a sniper was the need to be somewhat exposed. The barrel of the rifle needed a clear path to its target. This meant the sniper wouldn't be behind a tree or a rock. He would be flat on his stomach with camouflage as the main source of cover.

The fourth shot came dangerously close. It cracked off a large branch above Matt's head that swung down into his face. Matt deflected the limb, then snapped off a thin piece of the branch and jabbed it into the sleeve opening of his stuffed shirt. He worked on his breathing while he waited for the sniper to reload. He actually heard the bullets clip into the bolt-action rifle.

Matt gripped his Glock with his right hand and swung the stuffed shirt out into the open, quickly, before a trained eye could determine the dupe. It worked. Four quick shots blew apart the shirt full of leaves. He saw the muzzle flashes under a canopy of bushes just fifty yards

away. For someone with Matt's skills, the shooter might as well have hung a neon sign around his neck.

Matt jumped up, pointed the Glock at his target and fired once. That's all he needed. The barrel of the rifle flipped upward on its bipod and remained still. Matt charged up the hill toward the sniper's den. He was sweaty and shirtless and anxious to see the son-of-a-bitch who murdered his ex-partner. Julie's cries still haunted the forest as he scrambled the last few steps, his Glock out in front of him. Matt kicked away the brush and pulled off the layers of branches that covered the sniper. He tugged on the shooter's shirtsleeve and rolled over his limp frame. Then he froze.

"Rami," he gasped.

Afran Rami moaned and squeezed both of his hands over the entrance wound just below his heart. His shirt was already saturated with blood. He didn't have long.

Matt's mouth went dry. "Where is he Rami?"

"He'll find you first." Rami tried to grin, but failed.

"Where?" Matt asked again, but it was too late. A pair of dead eyes stared up at him while an ambulance siren wailed in the distance. Matt turned and saw the open view the kid had of the Bracco's front porch. Nick was down behind the wooden railing and Julie was hunched over him, moving with frantic urgency.

It was starting all over again. Nick had thought the move to Payson was the answer, but he was wrong. Terrorism doesn't have a neighborhood. You can't just move away. There are simply hot targets and cold targets. And Nick and Matt were hot targets.

The ambulance screeched to a stop next to the cabin. Two men flew open the doors and ran to the porch with their black bags. The flashing red and white lights seemed out of place at

the edge of the lake. They belonged back in Baltimore swirling against row houses and illuminating darkened alleys.

Matt took a long look down at Rami's corpse. For the first time in his career he'd lamented his marksmanship. He wanted to keep the terrorist alive, just so the warrior could see Matt capture his new leader.

The familiar squeak of a mountain bikes suspension came rushing up the path behind him. Matt turned to see Jennifer Steele jump off her bike and wrap her arms around his bare torso.

"Are you okay?" Steele asked.

Matt gave her a gentle squeeze. "I'm all right."

Steele pulled away and examined his banged up face. "That's a relative term."

Matt wiped his forehead and came back with bloody fingers. He'd been going so hard, the adrenalin had disguised the pain

She looked past him at the corpse. "Who is he?"

Matt looked down. "Afran Rami."

"He's with the KSF?"

"Yeah," Matt said. "Temir Barzani's nephew. Barzani probably offered him the opportunity to kill Nick."

"You mean *try* to kill Nick."

Matt snapped his head to face her. Steele's wobbly smile said it all. She pointed to a spot between her left shoulder and her left breast. A spot where no major organs resided. A survivable spot, even from a 7mm Magnum.

"He's alive?" Matt said.

Steele shrugged. "You don't want to see the exit wound, but he's going to make it."

Matt thought for a moment. "I need to see him."

"I'm sure he's on his way to the hospital by now."

Matt nodded absently, trying to figure out the best way to proceed. Without Nick by his side, he was at a momentary standstill.

Steele tilted her head. "What are you thinking?"

"Did Nick say anything?"

"Yes," she said. "He was in shock, but he urged me to get to you. He wanted you to know that it wasn't a pro. Otherwise, he said, he'd be dead already."

"What else?"

Steele shook her head. "He's lying there practically bleeding out and he's telling me to go back and help you. Like I need incentive."

She turned sad and Matt gathered her in his arms. "It's all right," he said.

She dug her face into his neck and sighed. They stood there embracing for a moment, letting their heartbeats settle into a steady rhythm.

Then Steele said, "It's just starting isn't it?"

Matt smoothed her hair and never even considered lying. "Yes."

"How well do you know Barzani?"

"Well."

"Are you better than him?"

"Yes."

The two stood there for a moment sorting things out in their heads. Finally, Steele pulled back and said, "You can't kill every terrorist in the world, you know."

Matt smiled. He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "I'll try to remember that."