

VINCE
FLYNN

CODE
RED

A MITCH RAPP NOVEL
BY KYLE MILLS

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS

ATRIA

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

PROLOGUE

SALERNO
ITALY

THE mist that had blurred the sunset was becoming more oppressive as the night wore on. Visibility was still passable thanks to the powerful lights of Salerno's commercial dock, but Absaar Mousa wondered if that would last.

Only if Allah willed it.

He wiped the condensation from his binoculars and once again glanced behind him. The first few trees glowed green, but beyond that the darkness was impenetrable. The steep slope had been difficult to descend even in daylight and now the journey would be too treacherous for even the drug addicts and graffiti artists who normally haunted this section of ancient wall. Still, it would be unwise to rely too heavily on that assumption.

He put the binoculars back to his eyes and swept them slowly across his field of view. The verdant mountains and artistically lit castle ruin. The modern city and dark sea beyond. Finally, he focused on what had brought him there: the city's port.

Mousa had become something of an expert on intricate operations over the past year, but the scale and complexity of this one still astounded him. He examined a docked transport ship as a series of cranes plucked brightly colored containers from its deck. From this distance, the impression was that of a swarm of highly specialized insects carrying away the toys of some unseen child.

This, as much as anything, encapsulated Western society. The constant flow of goods that fed their materialistic frenzy. The meaningless possessions that they used to fill the place that Allah—and only Allah—had the right to occupy.

He backed a few paces into the trees, searching for relief from the intensifying rain. After finding a bit of protection, he focused on a garish yellow container stacked on a dock to the east. The smugglers he'd contracted had taken great care to make sure that it was in no way remarkable, and they had done their job flawlessly. Even knowing what he did, it seemed so insignificant. So unworthy of the effort that had been expended to get it there.

Ostensibly, it was full of parts used in the repair of farm equipment. Less known was the fact that hidden inside them were fifteen metric tons of captagon, a narcotic rarely seen in Europe, but extraordinarily popular in the Middle East. He himself had taken it while fighting for the Islamic State in Syria and had later become involved in its manufacture and distribution. The small white pills stamped with two crescents had served a surprisingly pivotal role in the fight to spread God's law. They provided billions in hard currency to finance jihad and suppressed fear and fatigue in the men carrying it out.

The drug in that container, though, was nothing like the substance he'd handled during his days as a warrior. It was a unique formulation powerful enough to change the tide of the war against the West. To tip the scale back in the direction of God's army.

Under the direction of unseen benefactors, Mousa had spent

the last twenty months developing a European distribution network made up exclusively of Believers. It hadn't been difficult to find disaffected immigrants unable to integrate into the societies they found themselves surrounded by. Young men thirsting for someone to blame for their misery. A cause to give their lives meaning. Purpose. All things that Mousa had become an expert at providing. He'd learned from the imams of his youth to speak with unwavering certainty about discrimination and corruption. Imperialism and heresy. To describe in the most lurid and visceral detail the eventual seduction of these men's daughters and wives by the easy pleasures of the West. And if those lofty ideas failed, Mousa simply offered the money that his shadowy masters seemed to have in unlimited supply.

The army that Mousa had built was now complete. European government officials had been bribed, clandestine distribution centers had been set up, weapons had been secured, and devoted personnel had been put in place.

Finally, after so many failures, the war had begun anew. But on a very different battlefield. It was time to admit that the followers of Islam would never be a match for the West's military. His movement would never be victorious trying to penetrate the armor of its enemy directly. No, they had to be hit where they were weak. In the soft flank that had been ignored by his brothers as they became more interested in glory and vengeance than victory.

The phone in his pocket began to vibrate, but he didn't bother to read the text. He knew what it would say. His man had reached the port's entry.

Mousa adjusted his gaze to the trucks passing through the initial security checkpoint, seeking out a bright blue one hauling a white container. He felt his stomach clench as it pulled up to the guardhouse and the driver—a particularly faithful young man named Ja'far Saeed—handed his identification through the window. Not that the act was

visible with the intervening glare and rain, but Mousa had become so familiar with the dock's rhythms that it was hard to differentiate between what he actually saw and what was playing out in his mind's eye.

Mousa let out a relieved breath when the truck cleared security and started toward the area where it would be relieved of its empty container. Satisfied it was safe, he redirected his attention to a crane moving along a stack of containers that included one originating in the Syrian port of Tartus. The one that he'd spent almost two years of his life preparing for.

Everything progressed as he'd come to expect during the endless hours spent surveilling the port. Over that time, its repetitive efficiency had become strangely soothing. Today, that meditative spell had been broken by a trickle of adrenaline.

With its chassis unloaded, the truck set out toward the crane that had closed its grip around the container in question. Mousa watched as it was lowered to the ground and retrieved by a loader. His man stopped in the designated area and the lumbering machine placed the metal crate on his chassis.

The rest should have been little more than formality. A brief mechanical inspection followed by a check of his driver's paperwork. Instead, two service cars parked nearby suddenly accelerated and blocked the truck front and back. Hidden spotlights sprang to life, casting a piercing glare over a series of port workers, who were revealed to be armed with everything from handguns to assault rifles.

Mousa barely managed to keep from vomiting. It wasn't just the last two years. In reality, he had labored his entire life for this moment. The madrassas of his youth. Deadly battles fought across the Middle East. His infiltration into Europe and recruitment into the organization he now directed.

The leak that led to this disaster hadn't come from his team. Of

this he was certain. He'd attended to every detail. He'd chosen only the most fanatical and obedient men. He'd compartmentalized information in a way that provided no one person with enough to create a failure on this scale.

The only plausible explanation was that he'd been betrayed. One of the unseen men he worked for had been compromised by the European authorities. It had to be.

Mousa's initial shock transformed into a mix of rage and despair as he used his cell phone to send a brief text. While the army of the godless had undoubtedly won this battle, their victory would come with a price. The Italians were about to learn that they were no longer dealing with the old women who made up their mafia.

A new kind of drug demanded a new kind of criminal.

Ja'far Saeed squinted through the windshield, examining the vehicle blocking his path and the armed men who grew in number with every passing second. The spotlights, initially blinding, were made even more disorienting with the swirling light bars of police vehicles.

A trap.

He looked in his side mirror and saw men moving cautiously toward his door, staying close to the container he had been charged with hauling to safety. A ping sounded on the phone mounted to his dashboard and he read the message as someone began shouting Arabic instructions into a megaphone.

Roll down the window!

Put your hands through it so they can be seen!

He hadn't come here to be martyred. His job had been to get the container to its destination outside of Bergamo. He knew nothing more than that. Not why. Not what it contained. Not who would be waiting for him. He didn't need to know those things. Feeling God's presence and being of service to Him was enough.

But now the mission had failed, and his orders had changed. There

was only one thing left to do. One final act that would carry him to Allah's embrace.

Saeed put the truck in gear and rammed the vehicle in front of him. It rocked on its wheels and began skidding sideways, hopping awkwardly until its tires were torn from the rims. The pitch of shouted orders rose, but no one fired their weapons. They wanted him alive. They wanted to torture him. To force him to give up his brothers and turn his back on God.

Sparks began to fly from the back of the vehicle stuck to his grille, and then, suddenly, he was free of it. He moved through the gears, increasing his speed as the people on the dock tried to escape. He clipped one and managed to hit another head-on, pulling him beneath the truck's wheels and causing the suspension to jerk satisfyingly.

The gunfire finally started when he wrenched the wheel left and accelerated toward a fleeing man dressed as a dockworker. Holes appeared in his windshield, but he paid no attention. Something impacted the window next to him, embedding glass in the side of his face and blinding him in one eye. Despite this, there was no pain. Only hate and elation.

Saeed twisted the wheel again as his quarry cut right, but this time the trailer lost traction and the weight of the container began pulling it over. He threw his door open and leapt out, enthralled by what he knew would happen next. He'd been given authorization for one last act of vengeance against his people's oppressors, and now he'd use it.

His feet hit first, but the momentum was too much to overcome, and he found himself rolling uncontrollably across the dock. His position on the ground was enough to save his life when the bomb at the back of the truck's cab detonated, but not enough to keep his clothes from igniting. Again, there was no pain. Only the yellow firelight visible in his still-intact eye.

Saeed fought his way to his feet and saw the vague outline of a

human a few meters ahead. The bullets impacting him were barely noticeable as he charged forward and dove at the figure, holding on with what strength he had left as the flames enveloped them.

By that point, he could no longer see but, praise be to Allah, he was still capable of hearing his victim's screams.

CHAPTER 1

HINDU KUSH MOUNTAINS AFGHANISTAN

MITCH Rapp raised a fist before crouching next to a jumble of boulders. The men behind him would do the same, melting into the darkness and scanning for threats.

Sometimes, though, those threats were hard to see.

To the north, the Hindu Kush mountain range was outlined against the stars. A few of its taller peaks were still holding on to snow that shone dully in the celestial light. They dominated everything in this region, providing mortal dangers to the local inhabitants as well as the means for their survival. Even the shallow canyon Rapp found himself in was the result of ancient glaciers that had made their way across the valley floor.

Water was scarce, but the fact that the ditch to his left was lined with low grass and scrub hinted at its presence just beneath the surface. Not enough to sustain anything that most people would recognize as civilization, but sufficient for a few hearty souls to eke out an isolated existence. And for all their faults, no one could say that the Afghans weren't hearty souls.

A broad agricultural plot ahead suggested that they were closing in on their target and that's what had prompted the stop. Confirming what he'd seen on the reconnaissance photos, it appeared to have gone fallow some time ago. A few stone barriers and terraces were all that was left of what was once probably not much former glory. Most likely a family poppy operation with a few goats thrown in. Afghanistan the way it had been before and now was again.

The war was finally over, and it had ended pretty much how Rapp had always expected. To some extent, America was a ceaseless victim of its own success. Over the course of a couple hundred years, it had gone from a British colonial backwater to the most powerful country of the modern era. It had developed the ultimate secret sauce and was happy to pass out the recipe to anyone interested. Who wouldn't want that? When the US military rolled across your border, it wasn't to subjugate your country, it was to deliver you from oppression, provide education and health care, and build infrastructure. To create a pothole-free path to peace, freedom, and prosperity.

With all those rainbows and unicorns, what could possibly go wrong?

Same answer as always. Everything.

The Americans had never managed to assemble an Afghan government that wasn't a combination of the Three Stooges and Dr. Evil. That had created an environment in which the US military had to take over the administration of the country's affairs, while Afghan officials focused on stealing everything that wasn't nailed down. Ironically, what had kept Afghanistan on a reasonably even keel during the occupation wasn't their confidence in their own government, but rather their confidence in the American one. Much like the Romans of the distant past, the US could be more or less counted on to live up to their agreements, pay people on time, and generally get shit done.

When that abruptly ended, the locals had a choice to make, and they'd chosen the Taliban. It was something Rapp had warned Washington about more times than he could count. While the Taliban were

brutal and repressive, they were also predictable. And in this part of the world, predictability was about the best facsimile of stability anyone could hope for.

Back in the US, the mess of a war was inevitably followed by the mess of a pullout and then a mess of finger-pointing. Generals at politicians, politicians at the intelligence community, officers at generals, enlisted men at officers. The truth was that it was a failure at every level. One that the exhausted American people now preferred to pretend never happened.

All of which had combined to bring him to this place at this moment.

There were still a little over twenty Americans trapped in-country under various circumstances. Unfortunately, that wasn't a story anyone wanted to tell. It didn't fit into the former president's image of godlike master of the universe, and the media didn't see any profit in giving airtime to a subject that made Americans reach for the remote. Fortunately, with a new occupant in the Oval Office and Irene Kennedy back in control of the CIA, the clandestine services were finally able to start tackling the issue.

Or at least that was the theory.

After two minutes of motionlessness, Rapp hadn't heard anything that couldn't be attributed to the air filtering through the mountains. He motioned for his men to follow and continued along the degraded trail.

They'd already managed to get eight hostages out the easy way—with money. Taliban rule had plunged much of the country into poverty so abject that even the tough-as-nails Afghans were having a hard time hanging on. Famine was on the horizon and reports of people being forced to sell their children just to survive were becoming increasingly common.

It was a level of desperation that made even the most hardened jihadist forget about revenge in favor of finding the means to feed their families. With one exception, every kidnapper they'd contacted had

been happy to just take the cash. And now Rapp had returned to Afghanistan to deal with that exception.

Based on the Agency's network of informants, the two American nationals in question were being held in a village not far from there. Negotiations carried out by a local intermediary had gone nowhere, and after an offer of a million US dollars hadn't even rated a response, Kennedy decided it was time to extract the hostages by a more direct method.

The question was, why didn't this group want the money? Why were they looking to start a fight they were destined to lose? Based on the best intel available, they weren't even Taliban. Just an extended family group consisting of maybe forty individuals living in the middle of nowhere. They had no dog in this race. Hell, there *was* no race anymore.

In the end, Rapp suspected it had less to do with the Afghans than it did the former US president and his CIA chief. Anthony Cook had only managed to stay in the White House for a short time, but he still cast a long shadow—particularly at the Agency. His authoritarian views had found a surprising number of sympathetic ears in the organization, as had his plan to turn it into an apparatus with no purpose other than to consolidate his power. Kennedy was still trying to sort out who could be trusted and who needed to be shown the door, but it was a difficult and sometimes painful task. People they'd known and worked with for years had been seduced by Cook's vision and were still working to undermine her.

With that hurricane blowing in Langley, it wasn't particularly far-fetched to think that a faction still loyal to the former administration was trying to lure Rapp into an ambush. He'd been Kennedy's operational right hand for decades and losing him would be a significant blow to her. Maybe even a fatal one given the current political environment.

A village perched on an east-facing hillside emerged from the darkness and Rapp signaled his column to stop again. He dropped to

his stomach, slithering to the edge of the creek and descending into it. A trickle of water at the bottom shone black as he passed silently over it and climbed the other bank. Propping his HK416 rifle over the edge, he used its thermal scope to examine the settlement in more detail.

The scree-covered slope leading to it was steep, climbing maybe two hundred yards before reaching the lowest of nine visible buildings. All were constructed of stone—simple rectangular structures with flat roofs and one or two wood-framed windows. None appeared to contain glass and there was no sign of life at all.

“Looks good for our original incursion plan,” he said into his throat mike. “No contacts and the layout’s as expected. Advise when you’re in position.”

CHAPTER 2

SALERNO
ITALY

“IT’S a wonderful exhibit,” the young woman said in Spanish that suggested a privileged upbringing near Madrid. “You should take the time to see it if you can.”

Damian Losa nodded with a barely perceptible smile. His people had perhaps done their job too well with this girl. Her dark hair played across shoulders so smooth that they seemed to reflect the light of the terrace and the city below. Her smile flashed easily, revealing perfect teeth completely unaffected by the thousand-euro bottle of wine she was sipping. Was there a trick to that? Some kind of chemical film? Probably.

The problem was that she was so compelling that she attracted the attention of the other restaurant patrons. Furtive glances from both men and women, carrying differing degrees of envy, desire, and fascination. The exception was his ten-strong security team spread throughout the elegant dining area. They’d been trained to pretend not to notice him but, in this case, their disinterest made

them stand out. He'd have to remember to mention that to Julian at some point.

"I'm looking forward to the gnocchi. Did you see it? It's the third item on the tasting menu. I've never been able to perfect it. Italy's cuisine is simple on the surface, but it's all about the quality of ingredients and technique. In this case, the right potato combined with the right flour in the right proportion."

In their brief time together, she'd expertly covered subjects as diverse as politics, sports, art, and cooking in an effort to find something that elicited more than polite disinterest from him. His smile broadened a bit, so she ran with it. A moment later, he was being treated to very credible tasting notes on the wine he'd ordered and a description of the region that had produced it.

In truth, he didn't care one way or another about Italian food and only pretended to sip the wine in front of him. His increased engagement resulted from a memory she'd triggered of his mother making tortillas. The sunlight flooding through the window over the sink, the worn pots inherited from ancestors long dead. The earthy aroma.

Not that she'd had to make their food by hand or use those ancient implements. His mother had been a nurse and his father an accountant—members of a small middle class that had afforded him opportunities rare in that part of Mexico. He'd attended a modest private school and an even more modest university. He'd lived in a safe neighborhood and always had enough to eat. And he'd had his mother—a round and unwaveringly positive woman who woke up every morning with a heartfelt prayer of thanks to her God.

What would she think of what he'd done with the opportunities she and his father had worked so hard to provide? If she were to walk into the restaurant at that moment, would she even recognize the fifty-five-year-old man who had risen to become the most powerful criminal in the world? Would she be dazzled by the girl sitting across the table from him? A young woman he'd never met before that night and would never see again after tomorrow morning? Would the mansions,

jets, and yachts impress her? Would she mistake people's fear of him for respect and social standing?

Doubtful. In retrospect, it was perhaps best that his parents had died young.

The Girl—he couldn't remember her name—sensed his mind wandering and moved with impressive ease to the subject of technology. Something about augmented reality that he tried to track on because it was indeed important. The world was changing at a dizzying pace and over the last few years he could feel himself losing his grip. On it and everything else. A decade ago, he would have allowed everything else to fall away during their time together. He would have been engaged in the conversation and sharing the bottle. He would have been wondering if her incredible breadth of knowledge extended to the bedroom and looking forward to finding out. He would have recognized that these moments were the culmination of everything he'd worked for. A life of wealth and power so limitless that he existed separate from—indeed above—the rest of society.

The fact that none of this had crossed his mind over the course of the last thirty minutes was worrying. It took more than cunning and experience to stay on top in the business he'd chosen. It took a certain amount of passion.

A waiter appeared and laid two small plates in front of them, describing in detail the exotic nature of the ingredients and the chef's motivation for selecting them. Losa gazed down at the elaborately decorated bite of fish contained on a single spoon. Not really the kind of food he gravitated toward, but he admired the artistry and precision of it. While perhaps not a connoisseur of Michelin-starred restaurants, he *was* a connoisseur of expertise. In his experience, it was perhaps the rarest thing in the universe.

Halfway through the explanation, he lost focus and turned his attention to the coastline and the city of Salerno that bordered it. The commercial port dominated, with a single cargo ship currently docked and in the process of unloading. Despite the distance and rain, he

could discern individual trucks dropping their cargo and picking up new loads. Bringing the world to Italy and Italy to the world.

He lifted the spoon and slid the fish into his mouth, eliciting a smile from the Girl.

“Do you like it?” she said in a tone that suggested it was the most important question ever asked.

“It’s delicious.”

That prompted a charming story about her youthful penchant for stealing chocolate from a local restaurant’s kitchen. The fact that it was almost certainly fiction didn’t detract from its impact at all.

She was almost to the denouement of her tale when distant spotlights came to life over her perfect shoulder. He could just make out the urgent movements of a truck at their center and a moment later, the quiet pop of gunfire became audible, slightly out of sync with the corresponding muzzle flashes. Enough to furrow a few brows, but not enough to divert his fellow diners from their sea bass with asparagus. That took the explosion.

Everyone turned toward the percussive sound in unison. Losa thought he could see the flames reflected in the Girl’s eyes, but it was likely that he was just romanticizing the moment.

“What do you think it is?” she said.

“I don’t know,” he lied. “Some kind of accident, I imagine. Maybe they were transporting something flammable.”

“But there are police cars. And was that shooting I heard before?”

He shrugged. “I imagine it’ll be on the news tomorrow.”

“I wonder if anyone was hurt?” she said, drifting ever further from her script as she watched the fire spread.

“I don’t know.” Another lie. But after all these years, they came easy.

It was their most meaningful exchange of the evening, and the Girl used the opening to reach across the table and put her hand on his. She really would have been a pleasant way to spend the night, but he had too much on his mind.

She began chatting again as the people around them lost interest in the real world and settled back into the one provided by the restaurant. What happened on those docks—what contraband came in, who was injured, who died—had no bearing on their charmed lives. No effect at all on their families, future, or wealth.

Another seafood course arrived, and he watched absently as the Girl examined it with the aid of her fork. He allowed himself to enjoy her youthful enthusiasm for a moment before sinking into darker thoughts.

Three weeks ago, a member of his decimated network in Syria had sent him details about a shipment of reformulated captagon tablets leaving Tartus for Salerno. After a great deal of consideration, he'd decided to use his European contacts to inform the authorities. The hope was that the government would see the danger of this new variant and act with determination and competence.

A long shot, particularly in light of the fact that they'd largely missed the creation of an elaborate Muslim distribution network in their backyard. And to the small degree it had been noticed, it was being used solely as propaganda to keep the illusory threat of ISIS in Syria alive. The media-friendly remnants of that insurgent group allowed the world's governments to avoid facing the fragmented disaster that Syria had become.

Sadly, he could afford no such luxury. The network that had been built, and that this shipment would have put into full operation, was both surprisingly professional and shockingly well funded. The Syrian government's success at retaking control of its territory had combined with continued economic sanctions to transform the country into a narco-state. A potentially very successful one. Not only did they now have their European infrastructure in place, but they'd managed to develop a product that Losa's chemists couldn't reproduce.

Losing control of the European narcotics trade wasn't an option for him. He was the man who made people money. Who kept the peace and held the authorities at bay. The fact that he was now

competing not against another cartel but against an entire nation would be taken into account by neither his enemies nor his allies. Any territory ceded would be seen as weakness and the fear he commanded would soften. Soon there would be whispers—leading inevitably to open discussion—of his advancing age. Of whom and what would come next.

He glanced past the Girl again, watching fire suppression vehicles arrive on the dock. The other machinery had fallen silent, and it appeared that a full evacuation was underway. He'd managed to draw first blood, but the war ahead would be long and brutal.

How would it play out? With such limited information, it was impossible to make intelligent moves on the chessboard. His life had been one of careful action based on hard data. It was what set him apart from the sadistic and impulsive men who made up the majority of his peers.

Normally, this would be a job for his renowned negotiating skills. He would fly to Damascus, sit down with Syria's leadership, and come to a mutually beneficial agreement. He had done that with great success in places as diverse as Colombia, Thailand, Morocco, and even the United States.

The government in Damascus was somewhat more complex. The speed and ruthlessness with which they'd dismantled his Syrian operation had been stunning, as had their move into Europe. He knew now that he'd underestimated them, counting on their corruption, internal tensions, and lack of regional experience. An uncharacteristically careless error on his part.

At this point, a personal appearance in Syria was far too dangerous. He needed someone to stand in for him. Someone with the ability to navigate the environment there and to survive long enough to gather the necessary information and contacts. Preferably a person from outside his organization who would be incapable of revealing anything sensitive if subjected to torture.

That left very few options.

The Girl touched his hand again, pulling him back into the present.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve been distracted.”

“It’s all right.”

He smiled, this time with a bit more sincerity. No decisions would be made that evening. It would take a few sleepless nights to sort all this out. And if that was the case, there was no reason not to enjoy himself.

“Don’t be so understanding. It’s an insufferable trait in a dinner companion. But from now on, you have my full attention.”

CHAPTER 3

HINDU KUSH MOUNTAINS AFGHANISTAN

THE barely perceptible crunch of approaching footsteps became audible behind Rapp. Their rhythm was familiar and just as confidence inspiring as when he'd first heard them so many years ago.

"Still nothing?" Scott Coleman whispered, dropping to the ground and peering up at the starlit village.

"Completely dead," Rapp replied.

The former SEAL nodded and spoke into his throat mike. "Give me a sitrep."

Over his earpiece, Rapp heard their men respond. Joe Maslick was in position to the north and Bruno McGraw to the south. Charlie Wicker, debatably the world's top sniper, was still setting up in the high ground, but promised to be ready inside of one minute. There was no hurry, so Rapp waited a full three before giving the order.

"Move in. Hold your fire until you hear mine. After that, kick up some dust."

He and Coleman crept out of the ditch, with Rapp sweeping left

and his teammate right. They passed through a band of trees that had managed to take hold in the harsh environment and started climbing.

The loose terrain eventually gave way to a rock face steep enough that Rapp had to sling his rifle and use both hands to climb. Once at the top, he found himself within twenty yards of the village's first building—a crumbling structure with an empty door frame. He took aim at it and fired a controlled burst before running toward a path to the west.

A moment later, gunfire erupted throughout the tiny settlement. Muzzle flashes overpowered the starlight and the peace that reigned just seconds before was broken so violently that it was hard to believe it ever existed. A rotted wooden door with a rudimentary latch appeared to Rapp's right and he kicked it open, spraying the interior with his rifle.

The layout of the village made it practical to divide into quarters and each of them kept to his section in order to avoid friendly fire. Wick would remain in an overwatch position to call out any potential mistakes and deal with any surprises. Not that Rapp anticipated either.

He turned his attention to an ancient animal trough and put a few rounds into it because, why not? It still held some water from recent rains, and splashes appeared in the unsteady light. Rapp crouched and slapped in a fresh magazine before emptying half of it into the window of a house that looked exactly like all the others.

Finally, he stood, turning full circle before toggling his throat mike. "They knew we were coming!" he shouted. The level of his voice wasn't necessary for their communications technology, but was instead for the benefit of any Afghans who might be within earshot. The goal was to put on a show, and he felt like they'd accomplished that.

"Let's get the hell out of here!"

The undisciplined gunfire ceased, plunging the village back into the darkness and silence that it had been mired in for at least a quarter century. His three teammates fell in behind as Rapp broke into the open and headed northwest toward a designated landing zone. Wick

had been tasked with covering the majority of their retreat, but would soon start breaking down his kit to follow.

The dull thump of a chopper became audible as they maintained their heading, but it still wasn't visible as it angled in. Rapp continued to the extraction point at a pace that was set to allow his overwatch to reintegrate with the team. Still no resistance or any indication at all of human presence. Just as the Agency's analysts had promised.

The black outline of the helicopter finally appeared and began to descend. Rapp cut left and stopped, waving his men on. "Go! Go!"

Wick was straggling a bit and Rapp grabbed some of the diminutive sniper's gear to lighten his load. The doors in both sides of the aircraft were open and all five men arrived at roughly the same time, piling in as the rotors started to pick up speed again. When the skids began to leave the ground, they all jumped out the other side and slipped into a boulder field just beyond. A moment later, the chopper was airborne and banking toward their base of operations.

The actual target was a village about a mile to the north. The idea was that the men there would have seen the commotion and heard the helicopter, leading them to assume that the Americans had once again gotten hold of bad intel and attacked a settlement that hadn't been inhabited in decades.

If Rapp knew the Afghans—and he did—they'd get a real kick out of it. There was nothing they liked more than watching US forces screw up. It didn't happen often in combat situations, but when it did, the locals used it as proof of their mastery over the desert, the superiority of their way of life, and proof that God loved them best. It was human nature to embrace the inferiority of one's enemies. A bias so strong that it tended to prevent people from thinking too hard about the actual plausibility of it.

No one liked a killjoy.

CHAPTER 4

ASHRINK would probably be concerned that Rapp associated the smell of Afghanistan with home. Dust, stone, sweat, and food cooked over an open fire. The reason he'd been able to operate so successfully in the region was that to some extent he'd gone native. He'd never seen his time in-country as a tour. He'd rarely felt a compulsion to go "home," which, for much of his life, had consisted of a beat-up apartment with boxes that never seemed to get unpacked.

He looked up at the stars for a moment and then returned his attention to the path he was walking along. It led to the village where the two American hostages were being held, but went no farther. A dead end for him both literally and figuratively. He didn't belong there anymore. He belonged in Virginia. In South Africa. It still surprised him how clear that had become. He had a place, and it was with Claudia and Anna.

More and more, he felt like it was time to circle the wagons. To bring the few people he cared about inside and keep everyone else out. His enemies kept multiplying, but at the same time became harder to identify. No one cared about anything beyond creating sufficient

theater to move up the rungs of power. And anyone who wasn't unwaveringly devoted to producing that theater—anyone who for a moment lapsed into reality or put country before ambition—ended up with a blade in their back.

Maybe that's what had originally attracted him to Afghanistan. Their family and tribal bonds were unbreakable, and the enemy was obvious. The people here didn't skulk around. They looked you in the eye when they tried to kill you. Not exactly Utopia, but there was an appealing honesty to it all.

Rapp adjusted the cloth sack slung over his shoulder and slowed his pace. He'd traded his combat gear for traditional Afghan garb and a pair of trail-running shoes that had been deliberately trashed to look like something left behind by an American soldier. The hope was that he'd appear familiar enough not to set off any immediate fireworks. Just because the war was over didn't mean the peace had begun.

Ahead, the flicker of firelight was quickly joined by the scent of smoke. A few hours ago, the village he was walking toward almost certainly would have been set up for an ambush. There were solid reasons to believe that factions high up in America's intelligence community had convinced these people to hold on to their hostages in order to facilitate a little side job. They'd likely been given the time of Rapp's arrival, his incursion plan, the size of his team, and a rundown on his weapons. All they had to do was lie in wait. Then, when he and his men were dead, it would rain American dollars.

The question of what to do about it had been the subject of spirited debate. The obvious answer was to roll in early with an overwhelming force, but that had drawbacks. Namely, a lot of corpses that would inevitably include the two hostages. When Rapp suggested they carry out the attack exactly as planned, but a mile too far to the south, everyone had thought he'd lost his mind. They'd eventually come around, though. Mostly because it was his ass on the line and not theirs.

Rapp made it to the edge of the village without any issues. The houses were all dark, with shutters closed and the women and children

stashed safely behind them. Ahead, booming voices punctuated by intermittent bursts of laughter were audible. He continued toward them, listening to the conversation as it became intelligible.

Despite his Dari not being anywhere near as strong as his Arabic, he caught the gist. Strained jokes about the Americans not being able to read a map, needing glasses, or being led by women. The customary chest-thumping about what they saw as their overwhelming victory against the most powerful militaries in history. Alexander the Great. The Persians. The British and Soviets. Now the Americans. Beneath the bravado, though, there was always an undercurrent of fear. The realization that there could be a Reaper drone circling just overhead.

After what had happened in the abandoned village neighboring them, they'd be absolutely certain of their opponents' next move. When the Americans screwed up, they went back to the drawing board. They analyzed what had gone wrong, cleaned their weapons, revisited their strategies, and upgraded their technology. As far as the Afghans were concerned, there was nothing the Americans hated more than improvisation. But as predictable as Western forces could be, the Afghans were even more so. They'd been doing the same things the same way for the better part of a thousand years.

As Rapp closed in, the conversation became clearer, switching from light comedy to a graphic description of what they'd have done if the Americans had managed to find their village. Tales of heroics worthy of Greek mythology ensued, all with the requisite assurances of God's favor.

The bonfire and men huddled around it came into view a few seconds later. None of them were the enemy. Not anymore. The enemy now was the people in Washington and Langley who had set this up. To the Afghans, Rapp's death meant money for food and shelter. Maybe a little revenge on a former rival or bragging rights when it came to finding a wife. The betrayal wasn't here. It was back home.

He continued to grip the bag with his left hand, while extending his right in a way that would make it clear he wasn't holding a gun. The

reaction was immediate when he entered the circle of light. Men who had been sitting leapt to their feet and ones who had weapons nearby snatched them up.

“Salaam,” Rapp said, touching his free hand to his heart. While his Dari might be marginal, he had perfected the art of hiding his American accent behind an Iraqi one. That typically created enough confusion to keep everyone from shooting at once. But not always.

An old man who appeared to be in charge was the first to speak. “Who are you? Show yourself.”

Rapp eased the bag to the ground and slowly unwound the scarf from his face. Again, the result would be ambiguous. Dark eyes, beard, and sun-damaged skin.

“I was sent for the people you’re holding,” he said, nudging the bag with his toe. “I brought money.”

“Then it was a trick,” the old man responded, pointing in the direction of the abandoned village Rapp had attacked. “You knew we weren’t there.”

“Yes.”

“A warrior who fights with his head and not his heart.”

“I fight with whatever weapons are necessary.”

The old man turned his attention to the bag. “We’ve already been promised payment.”

“From the politicians,” Rapp said, spitting on the ground with disdain that he didn’t have to fake. “Cowards waiting to betray you from five thousand kilometers away. I came here in person with money in my hands. Better than a promise from men with no honor, don’t you think?”

“We aren’t being paid to release our hostages,” the man said.

Rapp nodded at the confirmation that his and Kennedy’s suspicions were correct. “You’re being paid to kill the man coming to rescue them.”

“Yes.”

“There’s no reason for it anymore. Give me the hostages and take what I’m offering. Use it to make a better life for your families.”

“No!” a kid on the right blurted. “Are you blind? It’s Malik al-Mawt.” *The angel of death.* A nickname the Taliban pinned on him when he’d operated there.

“I haven’t been that in a long time. And there’s no reason for me to be it again. You fought for your country, and I fought for mine. I killed your brothers, and you killed mine. But that’s over now.”

“It’s over for you,” the old man said. “You go back to your rich country and live like a king while my people starve.”

“We gave you every opportunity to build a future. You rejected it. You fought among yourselves, you fell back on tribal bigotry, and you cheated each other. If you want to blame someone for your situation, look in the mirror.”

Rapp scanned the faces in front of him, trying to hold back the memories. He’d been in a similar position on one of his first trips to Afghanistan. But back then he’d had better knees and a hell of a lot more youthful illusions.

Scott Coleman lay on his stomach in the dirt, moving only his eyes. He hadn’t understood the shouted statement coming from the center of the village, but the tone was clear. After a five count, though, still no gunshots. A second miracle happened a few seconds later. One of the two men guarding the stone building he was watching wandered off to see what the commotion was about.

This whole plan was nuts, but somehow it seemed to be playing out exactly as Rapp predicted. He’d said the men in the village wouldn’t empty their rifles into him when he came waltzing into town. That at least some of the men guarding the hostages would abandon their posts to exercise their curiosity. And that everyone would get out of this with their skin. Of course, that last one remained to be seen.

He slid back and circled to the rear of the target building. Based on a brief flare from around the wall, the remaining guard had just lit a cigarette. A consolation for being left out of the party.

The former SEAL slipped along the wall until he could see around its edge. The guard was no more than seventeen, with a smooth face that illuminated every time he dragged on his smoke.

Rapp wanted this to all go off without breaking too many dishes. For better or worse, the war was over, and he didn't want to revisit it. Coleman was more ambivalent, but he had no desire to kill this kid.

Unfortunately, his nonlethal tool kit was nearly nonexistent. Improvising, he picked up a rock and eased around the edge of the ancient structure. The darkness was fairly deep in that corner of the village and the kid had blown his night vision with the cigarette, so things went reasonably smoothly. The rock contacted his skull with a dull crack that wouldn't carry very far, and he dropped to the ground. Not sexy, but effective.

After propping him next to the door, Coleman flipped down his night-vision monocular and entered. In the northeast corner, he could see the two Americans asleep on the dirt floor.

"Time to get up," he whispered.

They both immediately woke, but were slow to move. The reason was easy to see with the benefit of light amplification. One was wearing an explosive vest with various wires leading from it to his companion. An antenna was visible above one of the charges, but the location of the remote detonator and whose finger was on it were impossible to say. Probably one of the men currently being chatted up by the newer, gentler Mitch Rapp.

"Is someone there?" one of the men mustered the courage to say.

"Shh," Coleman warned. "I've come to get you out of here."

"There's a bomb," the other said. "They've attached it to us."

"I understand." The former SEAL crouched in front of them. "Don't talk and don't move. Let me have a look."

Sadly for him, it was actually a pretty workmanlike job. Wires snaked everywhere and, unlike in the movies, they were all the same color. The weakness in the system was a couple of simple combination padlocks that secured the vest to one man and the triggers to the other.