



ENEMY OF THE STATE
EXCERPT

ORDER NOW

PROUDLY PUBLISHED BY



EMILY BESTLER
BOOKS | ATRIA

PRELUDE

**RABAT
MOROCCO**

IT was just after midnight and Rabat felt largely deserted. Prince Talal bin Musaid stared out at the densely packed residences built into the hills overlooking the city. His eye was attracted to a human outline ducking into an alley to his right, but through the glass of his Mercedes S-Class it didn't seem real. The layer of dust covering everything, the cracked façades, the ragged laundry hung out to dry—none of it had ever been part of his existence. This was the world of the faceless masses. The people he became aware of only when they failed to do his bidding.

Four days short of his thirty-ninth birthday, his life had become a blur of private jets, beautiful women, and luxury homes. London, Monaco, Paris, New York—they were indistinguishable to him now, existing only to house the opulent nightclubs and shops that he and his companions required. Exclusive places that precious few people knew about and even fewer would ever be admitted to.

He could still be coaxed back to Saudi Arabia when family politics demanded, but more and more it was a place to be avoided. A place of

[ORDER NOW](#)

bitter memories, betrayals, and reminders of a birthright stolen from him.

His driver eased onto a side street barely wide enough to allow passage, and bin Musaid looked away from the concrete tenements lining it. The boredom and disdain he normally felt when surrounded with this kind of squalor had been drowned out by excitement and anticipation. No more waiting. No more words. This overwhelming sense of exhilaration could only be generated by one thing. Action.

He slid a suitcase filled with American dollars onto his lap and felt the satisfying heft. It was the unfamiliar weight of purpose, he knew. The weight of power.

He was the nephew of King Faisal, but had never been treated with the respect that position demanded. After his parents' untimely death, bin Musaid had been sent to Europe, where he was forced to absorb the insult of Western schooling. His teachers—many women—had not only refused to defer to his station but had lorded their authority over him in a pathetic effort to obscure their own inferior birth. They'd given him poor marks and reported back to the king with stories of women, liquor, and violence.

All of this would have been of little consequence, but Faisal sided with *them*—with the British infidels who mocked both the House of Saud and Allah himself. Bin Musaid had finally been called back to Saudi Arabia after a meaningless incident with a female student. She had been a typical Western whore and he had treated her accordingly, no better or worse than required. In any event, he had welcomed the opportunity to take his rightful place in the ruling class.

It was not to be, though. Instead of a respected government post, he had been shuttled into an endless series of menial tasks and obscure, low-level positions. The king spoke enthusiastically of his bright future when they were together but never took steps to make that future a reality. Betrayed by his own family, bin Musaid had finally left the country of his birth and cut ties to the degree possible without jeopardizing the flow of family money.

He knew now that none of it was of any importance. The Saudi

Arabia that had rejected him was doomed. King Faisal was old and weak, a puppet of America who was losing control of the forces gaining power within his borders. He didn't understand the true destiny of his country. Instead of crumbling and besieged, the Saudi royalty should have been taking a place at the helm of the new caliphate. It was the House of Saud's privilege and responsibility to lead the forces of Islam as they exterminated their enemies throughout the world.

His driver leaned forward to search the darkness for a rare street sign.

"Left, you idiot," bin Musaid said.

He'd been poring over the maps and satellite images on Google for days, anticipating this moment. They would drive straight for another kilometer, where the street would dead end. From there he would continue on foot into the dark maze of souks that climbed even higher above the city. The journey would take approximately seven minutes at a pace designed not to attract undue attention from anyone he might pass. Finally he would arrive at his destination: a nondescript apartment building where an ISIS representative was waiting.

The money in the suitcase would be used to finance a large-scale attack inside the United States—something ISIS saw as critical to advancing their already wildly successful propaganda campaign. The lone-wolf attacks that they had inspired were unquestionably glorious but lacked sufficient weight in a country where mass shootings were a daily event.

It was critical that America's Muslims join the fight, but thus far they had been reticent—lulled into complacency by their prosperity and integration into the patchwork of immigrants and mutts that made up their adopted country. Cracks were beginning to form, though. America was already turning against its Muslim population. It just needed a final push for it to go from shunning Mohammed's followers to isolating, attacking, and discriminating against them. When that came to pass, there would be millions of young disaffected men ready to be recruited into the army of God.

Saudi Arabia's leadership had taken similar actions in the past.

In fact, two of bin Musaid's older cousins had been directly involved in the financing and planning of 9/11. While bin Laden had become the face of that attack, it would have been utterly impossible without the support of other powerful men familiar with America's vulnerabilities.

The prince smiled in the darkness, remembering the video footage of the burning towers and the terrified Christians throwing themselves to their deaths. It wasn't those glorious images that lifted his spirits, though. It was that the American politicians had known about Saudi Arabia's involvement but had been too cowardly to take action. Instead, they had made a hasty backroom deal with King Faisal. He would crack down on the subversives and keep the oil flowing. In return, the Americans would ignore the fact that the attack had been carried out almost entirely by Saudi nationals and instead divert their people's attention with the punishing quagmires of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Those wars and the lingering effects of the West's financial collapse had divided the American people to a degree not seen since the Civil War. America was a wounded animal. And he had become the lion.

CHAPTER 1

ABOVE AL-SHIRQAT IRAQ

MITCH Rapp tried to find a more comfortable position, but none was available. His helmet was jammed against the top of the fuselage and there was something sharp poking through the mesh seat just to the right of his spine.

Not exactly the CIA's G550, but then this aircraft hadn't exactly been designed to ferry government VIPs. Its only purpose was the insertion of select teams behind enemy lines, and in order to do that effectively it had to be small, fast, and stealthy. There was no pilot or cockpit, no cabin pressure or heat, and no light other than the dim glow from a computer screen to his right.

He glanced over and scanned the data it contained. Four hundred knots at 25,000 feet on a south-by-southeast heading. An infrared map moved lazily beneath the compass and numbers, tracking the ground. Near the bottom of the display, his target began to appear.

Al-Shirqat.

Despite everything he'd lived through—everything he'd done—there were very few places that held memories bad enough to make

his palms sweat. In fact, only two. The place his wife had died and al-Shirqat.

A green light over the door flashed and he disconnected his mask from the aircraft's oxygen supply, immediately reattaching it to a low-volume tank on his wingsuit. Slipping out of his chair, he sat on the carbon fiber floor and lashed a small pack between his legs. The countdown had started and he waited until the door began to retract to lower his goggles. The outside air temperature was thirty below zero and it lashed at him as he fought his way to the inky black opening. When the countdown in his earpiece reached zero, he threw himself out, struggling to maintain a stable position as he accelerated into his free fall.

After a few seconds he was steady enough to glance at the screen strapped to his wrist. Along with altitude, it indicated direction and horizontal distance to his drop zone. Not that hitting it exactly was all that critical—it was a more or less randomly chosen spot about a mile from the edge of the ISIS-controlled city. His old mentor Stan Hurley had beaten precision into him during jump training, though. Rapp could still picture the man standing in the middle of the landing circle, staring skyward.

If you don't kick me in my head, I'm going to kick the shit out of yours.

Who would have thought he'd miss the old cuss so much?

Everything below him was dark, creating a disorienting sensation of floating in space. Saddam Hussein's former officers were becoming increasingly prominent in ISIS leadership and with their rise came a commensurate improvement in discipline. They'd completely blacked out al-Shirqat in an effort to reduce the effectiveness of U.S. bombing runs. Worse, a few mobile SAM units were being moved around the battered streets. Their functionality was unknown, but the knowledge that they were there was enough to prompt him to jump from altitude and come in sideways.

He pulled his chute about a thousand feet above the ground, releasing the pack between his legs and letting it drop onto the lanyard connected to him. With a few deft pulls on the chute's toggles, he came

down directly on top of the planned target—a sandy knoll that offered him the high ground.

Rapp gathered the chute quickly and pulled off his goggles and helmet. He lay still for almost two minutes, listening. When he was satisfied that his arrival had gone unnoticed, he stripped down to a grimy pair of jeans and T-shirt, then dragged his pack to him.

It didn't contain much more than a shoulder holster with a Glock and silencer, two extra mags, some dried meat, and a shovel to bury everything else. Once done, there was little that would identify him as anything more than a local Iraqi who had been caught in the desert after sunset.

Without the screen on his wrist, he was forced to use the stars for navigation. Fortunately, they were just as effective now as they had been when explorers first set out to discover the world. He followed a southerly course, rubbing at his face to remove any marks left by his goggles. Based on weeks of overhead surveillance, he didn't expect to run into any security forces as he entered the city, but there was nothing certain in this business.

When Rapp reached the bombed-out buildings at the edge of town, he dropped to his stomach again. The men he was there for were farther toward the interior and he mentally reviewed the path through the city laid out by the Agency's cartographers.

When he'd escaped al-Shirqat last time, he'd been posing as an American ISIS recruit. The former Iraqi general controlling the area had devised a plan to use dirty bombs to take out Saudi Arabia's oil-producing capacity, destabilizing the world economy and leaving the Saudis vulnerable to a takeover by Islamic radicals. Rapp had managed to stop the plot, but not without the help of the local resistance.

Now the identities of those men had been discovered and ISIS was closing in on them. Most of the people at Langley thought he was crazy to come back, arguing that the risks far outweighed the rewards. And they were probably right. With one exception, the five young men Rapp was there to extract weren't good fighters. None

were much use at gathering intelligence, either. Mostly they sat around making long political speeches that the others then heartily agreed with. But when he'd needed them, they'd stepped up. Fuck if he wouldn't do the same.

Unfortunately, that decision had forced him to put a reluctant Joe Maslick in charge of the Rabat, Morocco, operation. In the end, it was probably a good thing. The op wasn't all that complicated and Maslick needed some command experience whether he liked it or not.

Rapp closed his eyes for a moment, acknowledging that he was just stalling. He'd hoped never to have to return to this place, going so far as to try to convince the military to mount a major assault to take back the city. Predictably, they'd pushed back. It wasn't that they didn't think they could do it. With U.S. support, the Iraqi army was strong enough now to recapture it. The problem was that the locals didn't really see the Iraqi army as much different than ISIS. Just another occupying force to fight an endless guerrilla war against. Welcome to the Middle East.

Rapp stood and moved forward, slipping between two buildings and navigating by the light of a full moon. This area of town had taken a lot of battle damage and was largely uninhabited now. He'd been through it once before but hadn't bothered to commit it to memory.

After about five minutes of generally southern travel, he came to a collapsed building with little more than the east wall surviving. It was one of the landmarks he'd identified from a photo at Langley and he turned left, cutting diagonally across a cratered square.

By the time he made it to the far side, he was certain he was being tracked. There was a natural rhythm to the debris dislodging from the structures around him and now it was off just enough to stand out. The footfalls were random and careful, but to the practiced ear they were unmistakable.

He kept his pace casual, climbing over a burned car to gain access to the alley behind it. When he was certain he was obscured from view, he sidestepped into a gap in the wall to his right.

Whoever was behind him was disciplined—Rapp would give

him that. It was a full two minutes before he was able to pick out an intermittent shadow inching toward his position. He dug a shard of concrete from around a piece of rebar and threw it, creating a nearly inaudible clatter twenty yards to the south.

The footsteps faltered for a moment. Rapp retrieved his Glock and waited, barely breathing. A few seconds passed before the silhouette reappeared. The man it belonged to was an inch taller than him and a good six inches wider at the shoulder. He had an assault rifle strapped across his chest and was moving in a manner that suggested he was more than just another ISIS dipshit.

Rapp remained motionless in the darkness where he'd taken refuge, watching the man approach. When he walked past, Rapp stepped out and pressed his gun to the back of his head.

The man didn't cry out or even speak, instead coming to a halt and raising his hands. Rapp moved slowly around him, brushing the barrel of his Glock through the man's hair until it came to rest against his forehead.

"I remember you being less sloppy," Rapp said in Arabic.

"And I remember you looking like the wrong end of a goat."

Rapp pulled the gun back and the big man embraced him.

"Hold your face to the sky, my friend. Let me see you."

Rapp raised his chin to catch the moonlight and the Iraqi gripped Rapp's beard, moving his face around to see better.

"It's miraculous what you Americans can do," he said sincerely.

In order to not be recognized on his prior operation in al-Shirqat, Rapp had been forced to let Joe Maslick beat his face into something resembling raw meat. That was the only face Gaffar had ever seen—the broken, bleeding, and swollen one Maslick had created.

"More surgeries than I care to remember."

"Yes, but still . . . it's incredible."

"How are the others?"

"They're managing, but they aren't soldiers. Fear is a good motivator, but this . . ." He waved a hand around him. "The cold, the boredom, the lack of food. It is hard."

“How long have you been hiding out here?”

“Two weeks.”

Rapp nodded. Often it wasn't the terror and exhaustion of combat that beat people down. It was everything in between.

“Come,” Gaffar said. “I'll take you to them.”

What was left of this part of town appeared to be uninhabited and of no interest to ISIS forces, but still it made sense to proceed carefully. They finally arrived at a massive concrete slab that had tipped against a crumbling wall. Gaffar picked up a rock and tapped it three times against what had once been a lamppost. A moment later the people Rapp had come for appeared at the entrance of the artificial cave.

On the left were two thin men who looked like computer geeks. One seemed to have lost his glasses and was squinting uselessly into the darkness. Mohammed, their leader, didn't seem too much worse for the wear and neither did his brother.

The Iraqi siblings were the only two men in the world that Rapp had a hard time looking in the eye, so he adjusted his gaze to the woman pressed against Mohammed's side.

“Who's she?”

“My wife.”

“You got married?” Rapp said. “Interesting sense of timing.”

“Shada was being auctioned off by ISIS. I've known her since we were children. I sold everything I had and used the money to buy her.”

Rapp looked into her dark eyes, taking in the unlined face and black, tangled hair. He had purchased Mohammed's sister under similar circumstances. This girl was younger and more fearful, but otherwise no different than Laleh had been.

The memory was accompanied by a painful constriction in Rapp's chest and he pushed her image from his mind. It would come back, though. It always did.

“If there isn't room for me, I'll stay behind,” she said as the silence drew out.

“No,” one of the geeks said, a little too loudly. “If anyone is going to stay here, it should be him. He got us into this.”

“Shut up!” Gaffar said in a harsh whisper. “We got ourselves into this. It’s our country to fight for. Our people who have destroyed it. Not his.”

He raised his hand to strike the man, but Rapp caught it.

“Look, all you have to do is hold it together for a little longer. Then this’ll all be over.”

He retrieved the food he’d brought and divided it among them. “Now eat up and gather your gear.”

“Then she can come?” Mohammed said.

Rapp nodded. “Five minutes.”

[ORDER NOW](#)

CHAPTER 2

RABAT
MOROCCO

JOE Maslick looked through the dirty windshield at the neighborhood around him. It was better lit than he would have expected but there were still plenty of shadowy corners to park in. At six foot one and 220 pounds, his ability to blend into this part of the world—hell, any part of the world—was crap.

Reason number forty-eight that he shouldn't be here.

Fortunately, it was late, and human activity was at a minimum. That wouldn't last forever, though. Before he knew it, early risers would start searching for their morning coffee, kids would begin the march to school, and vendors would begin positioning themselves to pick off the customers who preferred not to shop in the full heat of the day. Someone from that last group would undoubtedly bang on his window and ask him to move his car. But he wouldn't really know for sure, because he didn't speak Arabic.

Reason number forty-nine.

"Mas?" Bruno McGraw's voice over his earpiece. "You copy?"

"Go ahead."

“We’ve got a car bearing down on your position. Kinda unusual. Makes me think it might be our guy.”

“Unusual how?”

“Shiny new Mercedes S-Class. Two men in front, one in back.”

“So now terrorists are driving hundred-thousand-dollar cars?” he cracked to cover his nervousness. “Maybe we’re fighting for the wrong side.”

This whole op was fucked. His commander, Scott Coleman, was still recovering from almost being killed in Pakistan, and Rapp was off screwing around in Iraq. That left him squinting into the glare of the misplaced confidence of everyone from the director of the CIA down.

“Might be a false alarm, but he’s coming up on the Bani Street turn,” McGraw said. “We’ll see if he takes it.”

Maslick had never wanted to be in charge of anything. When he’d joined Army Delta, he’d decided the way to live a happy life was to pick good leaders and do what they said. It’s why he’d followed Coleman into the private sector and spent most of his career backing up Mitch Rapp. They did the thinking, he did the shooting. It was the fucking natural order of things.

“Yup. He’s turning. Game on.”

Maslick checked his fuel gauge. An eighth of an inch past full, just like it had been five minutes ago. He’d become obsessed with blowing this operation over something stupid and having to tell Rapp that he’d forgotten to charge his phone, or run out of gas, or brought the wrong map. It had gotten so bad that it was starting to interfere with his ability to think straight.

“Did you get any pictures?” he asked.

“Of the car, but nothing decent of the people inside. Too much reflection off the glass.”

“Copy that,” Maslick said, trying to calm down. This was a simple job, which was why it was given to him. A few months ago Rapp had gotten his hands on a rising ISIS star from Crimea. Hayk Alghani had been a con artist his whole life, spending most of his time in and out of jail or on the run. After one of his banking scams had gone bad, he’d

run to Sevastopol and holed up in a tenement run by local gangsters. The European authorities got wind of it, though, and in a panic he'd bought a copy of *Islam for Dummies* and hightailed it to Syria. His history of financial and Internet scams had made him an instant hit and he'd moved up quickly. Unfortunately for him, so quickly that he'd attracted the attention of the CIA.

Rapp had snatched him outside of Berlin and he'd cracked after the first face slap—giving up everything he'd ever done and pledging his undying loyalty to America. Now he was in a run-down apartment less than a mile from where Maslick was parked, waiting for one of ISIS's top money couriers. A man known only as the Egyptian.

All Maslick had to do was stuff the Egyptian into his trunk and get him to an Agency black site in one piece. By all reports, the man always worked alone, was getting up there in years, and never carried a weapon. Ops didn't get much easier than that.

Now, though, they were looking at a guy in an S-Class with what sounded like bodyguards. Pretty much the fucking *opposite* of easy.

Headlights appeared at the end of the empty street and began to approach. Maslick ducked down in the cramped seat, waiting for the vehicle to pass before rising again. Definitely a late-model S-Class. Even worse, it was riding a little too low on its shocks. Armor.

The brake lights came on and it eased left, disappearing from his line of sight.

"Wick," Maslick said into his throat mike. "They're coming your way."

"Roger that. I'm in position."

Wicker's vantage point was from the top of a building across from the one where the meeting was scheduled to take place. While Wick was undoubtedly one of the best snipers on the planet, his job at this point was just to observe. The goal was to capture and interrogate this asshole, not to kill him.

Maslick waited, noting that his heart rate was higher than it normally would be during a firefight. He didn't know shit about logistics, and while this op would have been a cakewalk for Coleman or Rapp,

it had too many moving parts for him to keep track of. Instead of one target, there were three. Instead of a conventional vehicle, there was an armored Mercedes. Was it possible that these sons of bitches had backup? Maybe Wick wasn't the only shooter on high ground right now in Rabat.

Maslick was starting to sweat so badly it was going to be hard to hold a gun, something that had never happened to him before. Not in Afghanistan. Not in Iraq. Not even in that disaster in Pakistan.

Reason number fifty he shouldn't be running this op. Or was that fifty-one?

"The target's stopped," Wicker said. "One man getting out of the back. Doesn't look Egyptian to me. Full Saudi getup—ten-thousand-dollar suit and a tablecloth on his head."

Maslick swore under his breath.

"I didn't copy that, Mas. Say again."

"Did you get a picture?"

"Yeah. Not perfect, but probably good enough for the cover of *Terrorist Prick* magazine."

Maslick slammed a hand against the steering wheel and then wiped at the sweat running down his forehead. Everything he'd been told by the analysts was now officially complete bullshit. This had just gone from a by-the-numbers rendition to an on-the-fly improvisation.

"Send it to Langley. See if we can get anything off facial recognition."

CHAPTER 3

AL-SHIRQAT
IRAQ

RAPP glanced at the glowing hands of his battered Timex watch and then behind him into the darkness. While he couldn't see much, he could hear plenty. Dawn was bearing down on them and they were moving at half his worst-case pace with twice his worst-case noise. The plan was to be well into the open desert by sunrise. Clearly, that wasn't going to happen. Time to come up with a plan B.

Gaffar slipped around a fallen column and Rapp followed his bulky outline as it approached.

"I told you to stay in the back and sweep," he said when the Iraqi came alongside.

"I understand, but this isn't going well, Mitch. Ali is struggling and Yusef says he twisted his ankle. It's going to slow our progress further."

That seemed impossible. There were people in nursing homes who could have made it to the edge of town by now.

"How far into the desert do we need to travel, Mitch?"

"About fifteen kilometers. It wasn't hard for me to drop close to

town, but bringing a chopper in is too risky. There are too many patrols.”

The rest of their people started trickling in after an excruciatingly long five minutes. The woman whose name he couldn't remember was first, keeping a reasonable pace. Not surprising. If anyone was motivated to get the hell out of al-Shirqat, it would be her. The perfunctory decapitation or firing squad ISIS would use to deal with the rest of them was downright humane compared with what they did to women.

“Tell me your name again,” Rapp said quietly to her.

“Shada.”

“Where's your husband, Shada?”

“Helping Yusef.”

It took four more minutes for the rest of them to gather. Yusef was limping badly with an arm looped over Mohammed's shoulder for support. Rapp was accustomed to working with soldiers who would go to extraordinary—sometimes even counterproductive—lengths to hide fatigue and weakness. Yusef, in contrast, seemed to be milking it.

The temptation to grab him by the hair and have a serious heart-to-heart about their current situation was overwhelming, but it would just make things worse. These were young civilians who had spent the last few weeks living out in the elements and the last few years living in hell. They were running on fumes, and when those fumes were exhausted, they wouldn't be able to switch over to determination or pride or loyalty to keep them going. They'd drop.

Rapp sank to one knee and motioned for the others to gather around him. “Change of plans. Trying to walk out of town and across fifteen kilometers of desert isn't going to happen. We're going to have to get a vehicle.”

Quiet murmurs rose up. Predictably, most seemed enthusiastic about the idea.

“Don't get too excited,” Rapp said. “We were going to slip out of

town without getting anywhere near an ISIS patrol. Now we're going to have to go looking for one."

"Perhaps the rest of us should stay here," Yusef offered. "You could get a vehicle and come back to pick us up."

Gaffar reached out and slapped the young man hard in the back of the head. "Does he look like a bus driver to you?"

Rapp motioned for calm. "Because of all the debris, getting a truck back here isn't going to be possible. And even if it was, it would attract too much attention. We go together and we get out of here together. Understand?"

More murmurs. Less enthusiastic this time.

"Gaffar, what's our best bet for picking up a patrol?"

"If we go north about a kilometer, we'll get to the edge of the territory that's regularly patrolled. And it puts us in a good position to escape the city without being seen."

"Then lead us out. I'll take over at the rear."

Shada followed on Gaffar's heels, with the others respecting the intervals that Rapp had insisted on. Yusef, still leaning heavily on Mohammed, was the last to set out. Rapp paced them at a distance of thirty feet.

He kept an eye on his six, but the danger of being flanked was pretty minimal. His position at the end of the column was intended primarily as motivation and it seemed to be working. Every minute or so Yusef glanced back and each time his pace surged.

The buildings around them remained dark but were becoming less and less dilapidated. The rubble that made stealthy movement so difficult gave way to smooth dirt, and empty window frames evolved into ones protected by shutters and glass.

Rapp heard a gentle crack above and he swung his Glock in the direction of the sound. Sighting over the silencer, he spotted the outline of a cat leaping between a series of open rafters. Otherwise, everything was silent. ISIS had instituted curfew and blackout protocols, and the local population wasn't inclined to defy either.

There was a vague glow becoming visible to the north and he stopped, turning his head to try to pick it up in his more light-sensitive peripheral vision. It turned out to be unnecessary. The sound of a car engine began to emerge from the same direction.

Rapp accelerated to a jog, passing the others on his way to the front of their ragtag column. As expected, Gaffar had stopped, taking cover behind a shattered fountain.

"It's one street to the east," he said, as Rapp knelt and motioned for the others to hold their positions. "Seems like they'll go for the edge of town and then double back on the street in front of us."

"That would be my guess, too."

"Then this is as good a place as any," Rapp said. "If the opposition looks manageable, we stop them here."

"And how do you define 'manageable'?"

Rapp examined the road and the buildings on either side. There wasn't much they could use to their advantage. Only surprise and the fact that the ISIS men would be unaccustomed to resistance from the locals.

"I assume you don't have a silencer."

"No. A revolver with five rounds. And a knife."

"In that case, anything over eight men will be risky."

"Eight? Are you sure?"

"You think we can handle more?"

"I was thinking less."

"Don't turn nervous on me, now, Gaffar. We'll flag them down and I'll go out there and try to make a few friends, get them to lower their guard. If you use my Glock, they're not going to hear much and they won't react right away. I—"

"No," Gaffar said firmly. "We both know this is a terrible plan. I will go. Your accent is not from this region and you're far more accurate than I am. Besides—and I mean no offense—you are not a man of great warmth. I, on the other hand, am loved by all."

"Is that right? I didn't know that about you."

"Ask anyone," he deadpanned as the hum of the ISIS patrol truck reemerged. "I have a very fine personality."

“Then let’s put it to use,” Rapp agreed. It was undoubtedly the better strategy, but his knee-jerk reaction was always to take on the most dangerous part of an op.

“Mohammed is armed also,” Gaffar said. “Should we solicit his help?”

“Not a problem for me, but do you really want him shooting in your direction?”

“I suppose not.”

Illumination from a single headlight began reflecting dimly off the buildings to their right, and Gaffar took a deep breath. It shook slightly when he let it out.

“You all right?”

“Of course.”

He’d been Iraqi regular army, trained by the Americans, and was solid in every way. But strolling into a group of heavily armed ISIS psychopaths would be enough to shake anyone.

Rapp dug around in his jacket and pulled out a pack of Marlboros. He held them out along with a pack of matches.

Gaffar grinned. “You are truly a gift from God. May Allah smile on you.”

“And you.”

With that, the big man walked into the middle of the street and held up a hand in greeting, squinting into the glare of the truck bearing down on him. It began to brake and Gaffar watched with calculated boredom, cupping a hand around a lit match and bringing it to the cigarette in his mouth.

The pickup skidded to a stop about twenty feet in front of him and the men in the back jumped out. All were shouting and all had AKs aimed in Gaffar’s direction.

The men in the cab were slower to abandon the vehicle, but when they did, Rapp was able to get an accurate head count. Seven. They were on.

“What are you doing out here?” the driver demanded. “It’s curfew.”

Gaffar tossed the match casually on the ground before taking a

long drag on his cigarette. “General Masri sent me. We had intelligence that Mohammed Qarni and his band were hiding out in the abandoned part of the city. I don’t think it’s true, though. I was able to find no trace of them.”

He started forward, ignoring the weapons trained on him, and shook a cigarette out of the pack for the driver. He accepted and Gaffar lit a match.

“They may have fled the city,” he continued. “If so, I suspect the desert will do my job for me.”

He held the pack out and the men around him approached hesitantly. Rapp watched carefully over his suppressor, taking in how each of them moved, how they handled their weapons, their level of alertness. By the time they all had lit their cigarettes, he’d designated each one with a priority. Of course, the unpredictability of battle would inevitably throw a wrench into his order, but it made sense to go in with some guidelines.

Gaffar was playing it beautifully. Apparently he was serious about being likable. The conversation was flowing nicely, punctuated every few seconds with laughter. Rapp couldn’t make out individual words anymore, but that was by design. Gaffar was speaking quietly enough to force the men to gather in close. A nice tight grouping, but one that was going to put him in the line of fire.

Rapp waited for another burst of laughter and fired two shots in quick succession. He abandoned his normal headshot—too obvious and messy—instead going for center of mass. He’d threaded the first rounds through the men with their backs to him and hit ones on the other side. The third shot was complicated by Gaffar’s position in the group and took longer to line up than he would have liked. The two men he’d shot had nearly hit the ground when he finally squeezed the trigger and struck a man just below where his assault rifle was hanging across his torso.

The driver shouted a warning and Gaffar picked up on what was happening without missing a beat. He screamed something about Mohammed and his gang and pulled his weapon, firing in the wrong direction to reinforce the illusion of a shooter to the south.

They all followed suit, opening up on the windows of the building across the street. Chunks of wood, vaporized concrete, and shattered glass rained down as Rapp lined up on the back of the driver. A quick squeeze of the trigger dropped him. Leadership gone. Next he turned his weapon on a man from the back of the truck who had seemed unusually wary and athletic.

Gaffar suddenly jerked and went down hard. It was violent enough to make Rapp hesitate for a moment, concerned that there was a shooter unaccounted for. He quickly realized it was just for show. Gaffar was now on his back behind the three surviving men.

Rapp returned to his target and dropped the man just as his companion lost the back of his head to a round fired by Gaffar. The last man standing suddenly stopped shooting and looked around him, confused. A moment later Rapp put a bullet into his right temple.

Then everything went silent again.

Rapp motioned to the others before running into the street to gather weapons. "Are you injured?"

"I'm fine," Gaffar said, getting up and dusting himself off.

Rapp tossed him an AK before dumping the other guns into the bed of the pickup. By then Shada was behind him and he helped her over the gate. Gaffar jumped in next to her and began pulling the others over the side. Mohammed helped Yusef in before running for the passenger door of the cab.

By the time Rapp began accelerating up the road, Gaffar had the people in back holding their weapons in a way that would make them look enough like an ISIS patrol to fool the casual observer.

"There," Mohammed said, pointing through the windshield. "Turn left and swing around. We'll have a straight path out of the city."

Rapp did as he suggested but didn't otherwise acknowledge him. With a little luck, they would be on a chopper in an hour and he would never lay eyes on Mohammed Qarni again.

CHAPTER 4

RABAT
MOROCCO

HAYK Alghani stood at the edge of the window, looking down on the winding souk below. He'd seen the flash of headlights a few moments ago, but now they'd gone dark. The suddenness of it suggested not a passing vehicle but one that had stopped.

The dizziness he felt began to intensify, causing his stomach to churn nauseatingly. He gagged and was forced to run for the bathroom. Pulling open the cracked toilet lid, he vomited into its stained bowl. Not much longer, he told himself. Soon it would all be over.

Or would it?

There was no question that he had done this to himself, but it seemed like another life now. The arrogant young man who had fled authorities in Sevastopol to join ISIS no longer existed inside him. And perhaps never had.

As always in his life, his current problems had begun with a woman. She was beautiful and impassioned—a devout Muslim who thought about nothing but God and the struggle. Despite having abandoned Islam after leaving home as a teenager, he became infatuated

with her unquestioning faith and unwavering sense of purpose. It was she who convinced him to flee into the welcoming arms of jihad. To give up his life of petty crime in favor of a far grander purpose: the creation of a new caliphate.

After a rushed marriage, they used contacts she'd made on the Internet to cross into Syria and then they were taken overland by ISIS representatives. To where, neither of them knew, but it didn't matter. They were out of the European authorities' reach and he was under the seductive spell of her beauty and her world of radical Islam. Wherever they ended up, they would fight for God against the evils of the West.

It was a simple matter to pinpoint the moment it had all gone wrong. They had been traveling for days, dodging Assad's death squads, Russian planes, and American drones. Sleep had consisted of fleeting moments in bombed-out ruins or caves. Finally, they arrived in an ISIS outpost beyond the infidels' reach. Mira went with a group of women to bathe. There she would have taken off her chador and been seen by them.

Later that day, he and Mira were separated from the rest of the recruits and put in a sweltering SUV that headed west across the desert. He started to become nervous when the driver refused to answer questions, but not Mira. Her certainty was unshakable. She believed that they had been chosen for some special purpose. That her destiny was to change the course of history.

When they were granted a personal audience with Mullah Sayid Halabi, she became even more ecstatic. To be brought before the man who was so loved by Allah. Who struck such terror into the hearts of the Americans. It was an honor that even she had never considered. He remembered her pledging her endless devotion and the amusement in the pale blue eyes that Halabi had been gifted by ancient invaders of his homeland.

Her eyes had been very different. Dark and filled with the glory of God. That quickly turned to horror when she was informed that her role in the struggle would be as a member of Mullah Halabi's harem. Alghani could still hear her pleading with him to save her as she was dragged from the room. But there was nothing he could do.

Once she was gone, he'd found himself standing alone before the ISIS leader. The amusement was gone from his eyes. They now seemed dead. Like water pooled in the empty sockets of a skull.

He had quickly pledged his own emphatic allegiance to the mullah and expressed how proud he was to provide his young wife to the cause. When Halabi's men began to close in from behind, Alghani desperately tried to find something that would make those eyes come alive again. He finally struck on it when he mentioned his great skill in financial crimes. The subtle change in the mullah's expression made him speak even faster, boasting about his expertise in fraud, laundering, and concealing bank transactions from authorities. A motion from the mullah's hand stopped the advance of his men and changed Alghani's life forever.

He had spent more than a year in the service of Halabi, setting up financial networks and collecting money from sympathizers around the world, but particularly from Saudi Arabia. It was a squalid but bearable life right up until his existence came to the attention of the CIA.

Three months ago he'd been running a routine errand in Berlin's financial district when two men jumped him and pulled him into a van. He awoke naked on a concrete floor, with zip ties securing his hands and feet. There was no light and no sense of time. He shouted to his captors but got no answer. He pleaded. He begged. He even prayed. Finally, the cold, hunger, and isolation eclipsed his fear of the mullah and he offered anything—everything—for a brief moment of human contact.

It was then that he had met Mitch Rapp. The American had the same dead expression as Halabi and the same capacity for violence, but the similarities ended there. Where the ISIS leader was volatile, unpredictable, and cared for nothing but his own perceived stature in the eyes of his god, Rapp was infinitely rational. He knew his enemies and what was necessary to defeat them. The question was whether Alghani could assist him in his efforts or whether he would be more useful with a bullet in his head.

Without Mira, he had once again lost his faith. In the end, he was

just a criminal. A self-serving little man who cared nothing for Islam or the caliphate. He just wanted to survive.

Rapp had given him that opportunity. After telling the CIA everything, he was returned to ISIS with orders to provide regular reports on the work he did for them. When he informed the Agency of the Rabat meeting, Rapp decided he wanted the courier. And in exchange, Alghani would be given his freedom.

There was a quiet knock on the front door and Alghani rinsed his mouth out before striding across the empty flat. He had barely turned the knob when a powerful man in a dark suit forced his way in. He moved quickly through the apartment, searching for anything amiss. Finally, he shoved Alghani against a wall and frisked him. The only thing he had was a phone and the man took it, removing the battery before dropping it on the floor. Satisfied that the flat was secure, he retreated to a corner and spoke into a microphone attached to his wrist.

A moment later another man entered. He was thin but had a belly that protruded over a belt that looked like it cost more than most people made in a year. Alghani took an involuntary step back and a satisfied smile curled the man's lips. Who were they? He was supposed to meet a lone courier. An Egyptian in his fifties who knew more about the individuals involved in financing ISIS than anyone but Mullah Halabi himself. Had the CIA betrayed him? Had the Mullah discovered his treachery? Were these men here to kill him?

Alghani took another step back, but then noticed the suitcase in the man's hand. Having had significant experience with these kinds of exchanges, he knew that it was the correct size to hold the amount of cash that was to change hands that day. One million U.S. dollars.

"You have the money?" Alghani asked, hoping to gain some understanding of his situation.

"Of course," the man said. "But I'm sorry that Mullah Halabi couldn't come personally. He and I have much to discuss. The creation of the caliphate and the spread of the one true religion is no small task. And the Western powers are no small opponent."

Alghani nodded submissively. He'd initially thought that the man

was a wealthy Saudi businessman but he could now see that he was wrong. The regal posture, the comically exaggerated sense of self-importance, the recklessness of cutting out the Egyptian and handling this errand personally. A young prince.

Alghani had dealt with them many times, both in his current capacity and previously when he'd targeted them in a number of real estate scams. As near as he could tell, they were all the same. Useless, arrogant, stupid men who believed that their privileged birth put them above the rest of humanity. Qualities that made them attractive targets for graft and utterly blind to the fact that they would be the first to die in a caliphate led by Sayid Halabi.

In this instance, though, the royal's presence created an impossibly dangerous situation. He had promised Rapp the Egyptian courier. Not a pampered child. Would the CIA man think he had been duped? Would he revoke his promise of freedom in favor of a summary execution?

The man held out the suitcase. "A gift from me to your leader. The first step in drawing the Americans into a fight that they can never win."

Alghani accepted the case and confirmed its weight at around ten kilograms. He expected the young Saudi to turn and disappear from his life forever, but instead the idiot began to speak again.

"We'll battle the American cowards from without while simultaneously destroying them from within. I know them well. I was educated in the West and have many business interests in the United States. The American people are weak and easily manipulated. They see things in terms of five years. Perhaps ten. We understand that those time frames are meaningless. Allah is eternal and favors the patient. We will defeat them over the next fifty years. Or a hundred. Or even a thousand. As their society crumbles under the weight of its own wickedness and lack of cohesion, we will rise up to take their place."

"Praise be to Allah," Alghani responded, trying to comprehend why this pup wouldn't leave. What profit could there be in staying? Surely there were safer places that he could listen to himself talk.

“As I say, I know the Americans,” he continued. “Better than they know themselves. I would like to offer my services to the mullah. If he wants to destroy the Westerners, he must first understand them. His background . . .” The Saudi’s voice faded for a moment. “. . . would make that kind of understanding difficult.”

Alghani had to struggle not to react. Halabi had been educated in madrassas likely financed by this man’s own family. While the mullah indeed lacked direct experience with the West, he had retaken enormous amounts of territory lost by his predecessor and created a complex command and control structure that the world was only now beginning to understand. What had the pampered man-child standing in front of him ever accomplished? His only responsibility was to cash the checks provided to him and to try not to lose it all in Europe’s casinos.

“I will pass on your generous offer to the mullah when I see him. I’m sure he would greatly value your counsel.”

Like others of his kind, the man was easily flattered. He smiled condescendingly and motioned to his bodyguard. A moment later they were finally gone.

Alghani opened the briefcase and emptied the bundles of American dollars on the floor before retrieving his phone and replacing the battery. He stood by the window, peering out and trying to slow his breathing. A few moments later he saw headlights flash on and move away. When the darkness and silence had descended again, he made a move for the door but stopped with his hand on the knob.

What should he do? Call Rapp’s people and tell them that the man he’d met with wasn’t the one they’d expected? Or should he just run? What would give him the best chance of forever disappearing from the gaze of Sayid Halabi and, even more important, from the gaze of Mitch Rapp?

CHAPTER 5

AL-SHIRQAT
IRAQ

R EPEAT that,” Rapp said into his throat mike. “I lost you.”
No response.

Despite having to deviate from the initial plan and take the truck, the operation was going pretty smoothly. Mohammed’s lifelong familiarity with the area had gotten them on the road out of town without being seen and with no wrong turns. Al-Shirqat was five miles in Rapp’s rearview mirror and he was estimating that they’d arrive at the LZ in another six. The road surface was better than his intel had suggested and the bottomed-out pickup was negotiating it with no significant problems. Its maximum speed wasn’t much over thirty, but the wheels hadn’t fallen off and all the gauges looked good.

“Marcus! Come in!”

“Hold . . .” came the static-ridden reply. “Trying to fix . . .”

Marcus Dumond was a computer hacker who would have been in prison if it weren’t for Rapp intervening and giving him a job. Over the past couple of years he’d become increasingly involved in these kinds of operations and had proved his worth many times over. In a way, he

was a victim of his success. He despised being involved in life-or-death situations and knew precisely nothing about military tactics. His grasp of technology, though, was second to none.

“Penetrating the army’s jamming is a pain in my ass!” he said when he came back on the comm. The military was doing everything it could to keep electronic communications down in ISIS-held territory, and Dumond had set up a narrow encrypted band to cut through. Unfortunately, its effectiveness was spotty.

“I’ve got you back,” Rapp said, slamming into a deep rut that the feeble headlight hadn’t picked up. He glanced back to confirm the people riding in the bed hadn’t been thrown out. Gaffar anticipated his concern and gave a few encouraging slaps on top of the cab.

“The good news is that the chopper’s on schedule,” Dumond said.

“And the bad news?”

“You’ve got a patrol coming at you from the north. Same road.”

“How far out?”

“Call it two miles. You should be seeing their lights pretty soon.”

“Any detours I can take?”

“None. Can you just go off road a hundred yards? They’ll drive right by.”

“We’d be lucky to make it ten feet before we bog down.”

“They probably won’t do any better, then. Go as far as you can and then move fast to the LZ on foot. They’ll probably see your truck and come after you, but, traveling as the crow flies, you’d just have to stay ahead of them for about four miles. Mostly flat terrain with a few moderately rocky sections.”

An easy task if he’d been with Coleman’s team, but this crew would get chased down inside of five minutes.

“Not a chance.”

“Then I’m out of ideas, Mitch. I can tell you this, though: if you keep on like you are, you’re going to run right into them.”

Rapp swore under his breath. “What’s happening in town?”

“I’ve got the drone over top of you, so my view isn’t as good. They’ve definitely found the mess you made and have patrols converging on

the area. One vehicle seems to be tracking your path out of the city somehow, but too slow to be a problem for you.”

Not necessarily true, Rapp knew. While the U.S. had been successful at shutting down cell and satellite communication in the area, they hadn’t been able to do much about short-range radio. It was possible that the patrol ahead of them knew what was happening in town and was looking for them.

“Understood. Stand by.”

Rapp looked over at Mohammed and switched to Arabic. “We’ve got a patrol coming in our direction.”

“A patrol?” he said, twisting in his seat. “What do you mean? There are no turns off this road. They—”

“Calm down. We’re going to be fine. You’re probably going to have to take over driving, though. Just stay on the road and follow the directions I gave you to the LZ.”

“I don’t understand.” His words came out in a barely comprehensible jumble. “Why would I have to drive? What are you going to do? Where will you be?”

Rapp ignored him, instead banging a fist on the window behind him. A moment later Gaffar leaned around and stuck his bearded face in the open driver’s-side window.

“Do we have a problem, Mitch?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. There’s a patrol coming down on us. Tell everyone to look friendly.”

He nodded and pulled back into the bed to get his people in line.

“Mitch . . .” Mohammed started.

“Not now,” Rapp responded. A slight glow was becoming visible in the distance, but it wasn’t the approaching patrol that made him grip the wheel tighter. It was Mohammed’s face in his peripheral vision.

“I need to ask you a question.”

Rapp remained silent, hoping that the young Iraqi would lose his train of thought as the threat of the men coming at them increased. Not surprisingly, the opposite was the case. Mohammed didn’t want to leave this world without knowing how his sister had died.

“What happened to Laleh, Mitch? General Mustafa was stabbed to death and we found her body lying next to his with a gunshot wound to the chest. You were there, weren’t you? When she was killed?”

Again Rapp didn’t answer. The oncoming patrol vehicle wasn’t going to save him, though. It seemed to be moving in slow motion.

“She had a knife,” he said finally. “I didn’t see it. She attacked Mustafa.”

Mohammed nodded, a vengeful smile just barely visible in the glow of the gauges. “My brother thought it was you who had killed that pig. But I knew. Laleh was the strongest of us. Ever since we were children.”

Rapp pressed harder on the accelerator, but the truck wouldn’t respond. Even downhill, thirty-five miles an hour was all it would give him.

The silence between them lasted only a few seconds before Mohammed broke it. “So one of General Mustafa’s guards shot her?”

Rapp knew he could lie. No one would ever know. He was the only living witness to what had happened.

“Mitch?”

“It wasn’t one of the guards.” He’d known this conversation was inevitable when he’d come back for Mohammed and his people. And he’d made his decision about what to say long before he’d set out for Iraq. Laleh deserved to have her story known. Her real story.

“Who then?”

“I shot her. The general was bleeding out on the floor. His guards were going to take her.”

He wasn’t sure how Mohammed would react but was surprised when he just sank a little deeper in his seat.

Where the fuck was that patrol? Anything would be better than having to sit here and talk about Laleh. He was just starting to be able to sleep through the night without her memory jerking him awake.

“I know what ISIS does to women who defy them,” Mohammed said finally. “Like you, I’ve witnessed it personally. And I’ve seen what’s left of their bodies after.”

He put a hand on Rapp’s shoulder. “Me and my brother are the

only people left from my family. And on behalf of both of us, I want to thank you for having the courage to do what had to be done. I know how hard it would be for an American. Even one like you.”

A set of headlights appeared from over a rise in front of them and Rapp tried to determine whether the road’s shoulder was solid enough to divert onto if the oncoming patrol tried to block them. Not a chance. The sand had drifted into a soft ridge alongside the roadbed and ahead it grew into a low cliff.

“What are we going to do?” Mohammed asked.

“Nothing. For now, just sit there.”

The intensity of the headlights grew until Rapp had to pull down the visor in an effort to protect what night vision he had. He eased as far right as he could and hovered a foot over the brake in case the patrol turned sideways in the road. At one hundred yards it became clear that the vehicle was similar to their own—a small pickup with two men in the cab and more standing in the bed. Unless the driver was an idiot, he would resist the urge to do anything sudden out of fear of throwing his men into the road.

At fifty yards Mohammed reached for the pistol in his waistband. “Are you sure we shouldn’t—”

“Don’t do *anything*.”

He heard Gaffar shout a greeting that wasn’t returned. The men in the truck just stared at them as they passed. Rapp drifted back to the center of the road, focused on the rear view mirror. Twenty-five yards. Fifty . . .

Suddenly the men in the bed of the ISIS truck crouched to steady themselves.

“Shit . . .”

“What?” Mohammed twisted around in time to see the truck skid ninety degrees to a stop.

Rapp shoved the accelerator to the floor without much effect as the truck behind them struggled to turn around without getting bogged down.

“Take the wheel,” he said, throwing open the door and stepping

onto the running board. He found Gaffar already in motion, gathering mags from the terrified people around him.

“All right, listen to me,” Rapp said to Mohammed as the man slid into the driver’s seat. “We’re going to start up the hill and when we circle behind that cliff, you’re going to slow down enough for me and Gaffar to jump. Use the parking brake—we don’t want the brake lights to go on. Do you understand?”

He gave a jerky nod, keeping his hands locked around the wheel at two and ten o’clock. Rapp swung into the bed and accepted an assault rifle along with three magazines.

“What’s the plan?” Gaffar shouted over the wind.

“We’re getting out. You take the high ground to the east of the road. I’ll set up in the sand to the west. You shoot first—drive them to me.”

Gaffar nodded.

The patrol vehicle finally managed to turn around and its engine was audible as the driver pushed it to the limit. Unlike the little service vehicle they were stuck in, the one chasing them was a late-model Toyota Tacoma. By the time Mohammed got them around the cliff and started to slow, the patrol truck had already cut the distance between them in half.

Velocity was hard to judge in the dark, monochromatic landscape, so Rapp looked through the back window, waiting for the speedometer to reach fifteen miles an hour. When it did, he threw his AK over the side and jumped out after it, clearing the road and landing in the softer sand at its edge. Gaffar, heavier and less athletic, came up short and hit harder, rolling across the road surface before coming to a stop.

Rapp scooped up both weapons and ran to him.

“You alive?”

“I’m fine,” he said, rising unsteadily.

Rapp grabbed the man’s hands and jerked back on them. Gaffar managed to resist and maintain his balance without too much difficulty. He was just shaken up. No damage done.

Rapp handed over one of the weapons. There wasn’t much time. The approaching engine was getting louder.

The Iraqi ran toward the cliff at the edge of the road while Rapp

retreated into the desert on the other side. He glanced back and saw Gaffar scrambling to high ground, looking solid and making decent time. The glare of headlights was growing in intensity, increasing the sense of urgency but also allowing Rapp to move more quickly over the uneven ground. He crested a small sand drift and dropped to his stomach on the other side.

Aiming into the oncoming headlights wouldn't be optimal, but Gaffar didn't have to be all that precise. He just needed to put the fear of God into these pricks.

The truck rounded the corner fast enough to lift onto two wheels. It had barely managed to straighten out when Gaffar opened up on the windshield. Unfortunately, the men in back were well braced and the truck didn't roll. Instead it just lost power and slowed as the driver slumped against the steering wheel. The men in the bed leapt out as the vehicle began to grind against the cliff. There were eight of them and all looked uninjured. By contrast, both men in the cab appeared to be either dead or incapacitated.

Four went for the cliff, taking cover directly below Gaffar, where they would be invisible to him. The others were running directly at Rapp. Gaffar took one out when he was still fifteen yards away, but it was a lucky shot. The truck's headlights had been damaged by its impact with the cliff and Gaffar wasn't going to be able to reliably hit crouched, running men in the moonlight.

Rapp's earpiece crackled to life but this time it wasn't Marcus Du-
mond. The voice belonged to Fred Mason, his go-to chopper pilot on operations like these. "Mitch, I'm inbound and I'm seeing a lot of com-
motion to the southwest. Are you kicking up dust over there?"

"That's an affirmative."

"You need help?"

The three remaining men had closed to within ten feet and Rapp fired, sweeping across them. Two dropped immediately, but one made it a few more steps, before falling into the sand right in front of Rapp.

"No. Continue on your heading. Your cargo should be arriving at the LZ in about fifteen."

“What about you?”

“We’ll play that by ear.”

The men huddled at the base of the cliff had seen the flashes of his rifle and began pummeling the dune Rapp was ensconced behind. The body in front of him jerked with bullet impacts and Rapp slithered back a few feet before starting to crawl south. After a few seconds, the guns went silent. The terrorists would have no way to confirm a kill and would want to conserve their ammunition. After covering fifty yards, Rapp slung the rifle across his back and darted across the road. The scramble up the cliff took longer than it should have, but he had to remain silent. Not because of the assholes behind the truck, though. Because of Gaffar. They had no way to communicate and he was going to be looking for anyone coming up behind him.

Rapp swung well into the desert before cutting back. Moving slowly and focusing on every footfall, it took another three minutes before he spotted Gaffar lying at the edge of the cliff. Rapp came up directly from behind and put a hand on the man’s back.

He jerked and started to spin, but Rapp held him to the ground. “Relax. It’s me.”

The Arab let out a long, wavering breath as Rapp dropped next to him. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“They’re not moving?”

“No. They seem suspiciously comfortable where they are. I think we can assume that they’ve called for help.”

Rapp nodded in the darkness. “How fast are you on foot?”

“Middle of my graduating class in the army.”

So not very fast.

Rapp activated his throat mike. “Marcus, you copy?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Have you got a bead on us?”

“You’re kind of hard to miss.”

“Do we have incoming?”

“Four trucks. All full. ETA to your position is probably ten minutes.”

“Can you reliably track a man in the desert?”

“With thermal. Sure.”

“Okay, I’m handing my radio over to Gaffar. You’re going to have to give him instructions on how to get to the LZ from here. He doesn’t speak English, though, so call down for a translator.”

“Okay, Mitch. No problem.”

“Fred,” Rapp said. “Are you copying this?”

“Affirmative.”

“Give me a sitrep.”

“I have eyes on your people and I’m getting ready to land.”

“Pick them up and get back in the air. Then stand by.”

“Roger that.”

He removed his earpiece and throat mike, handing them to Gaffar. “Your heading is due east to the LZ. It’s going to be about eight kilometers over moderately difficult terrain. Keep a reasonable pace. Don’t blow yourself up and don’t fall in any holes.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Keep these guys down long enough to give you a head start.”

“No. I won’t leave you here. We should—”

“You’ll be too slow for me out there. Go now and I’ll catch you.”

The Arab reluctantly turned and crawled a few yards before getting to his feet and accelerating to a careful jog.

Rapp settled into the silence. The wind was completely dead and nothing around him moved. He was completely on his own. A pleasant change from the babysitting he’d been doing over the last few hours.

He didn’t have to wait long for the illusion of peacefulness to be shattered. Not by the sound of oncoming trucks but by a quiet rustling from below. A moment later he saw the dark outline of a man break cover for a split second and then jerk back. Rapp just sat there. A few moments later the man showed himself again. This time for a bit longer. Again Rapp did nothing.

Finally the shadow came out from behind the truck and began skirting the cliff. Rapp gave him a long leash, hoping that his companions would get overconfident and follow. When he started climbing to-

ward Rapp's position, though, it became clear that the other surviving men had decided to sit tight and wait for reinforcements.

Rapp fired a single shot, hitting the man in the stomach and sending him toppling back to the road. A few shouts followed but no one was stupid enough to go to the aid of their wounded companion. Not a big surprise, but it had been worth a try.

A few minutes passed quietly before headlights appeared to the south. Rapp watched them as excited voices once again became audible below. Four vehicles coming fast. Whatever Gaffar's head start was, it would have to be enough.

Rapp stood and began running into the desert as the convoy continued to bear down. He figured he was about doubling Gaffar's pace, slowed slightly by the fact that the only way for him to navigate to the LZ was to follow the man's tracks in the moonlight.

He'd only made it about five hundred yards when the shooting started. It sounded like the reinforcements had arrived and that all of them were firing on full auto. No point in looking back. He assumed that they'd pulverize the top of the cliff he'd been staked out on and then charged en masse. ISIS was not known for its subtlety.

He covered another quarter mile before temporarily losing Gaffar's footprints on a rocky plateau. The man was smart enough not to change direction, and Rapp picked them up again in the sand on the other side.

The news wasn't all good, though. Behind, he could see no fewer than ten flashlights coming his way. The lead one was using the advantage of artificial illumination to good effect and actually seemed to be closing. Rapp considered abandoning Gaffar's tracks in favor of speed, but it wasn't time for that yet. There was a whole lot of desert out there.

To the east, a dull glow was starting on the horizon. The light improved his speed, but it also robbed him of his cover—something that became evident when shots sounded behind him. He glanced back and estimated the distance to the closest chaser at more than six hundred yards. A doable shot with the right equipment and training, but they seemed to have neither. Just a little youthful jihadi enthusiasm.

The question was how long this was going to go on. Did Marcus have a position on him? Was Fred willing to fly in on a force of probably thirty armed men?

His question was answered a moment later when the thump of rotors became audible ahead. With the sunlight angling in, he was able to pick up his pace to the maximum his lungs would allow, increasing the gap between him and his pursuers. If he could gain some ground, the chopper would be able to touch down long enough to get him aboard.

Apparently, Mason didn't want to wait. He passed overhead, banking north as the sound of his door gun shook the air. Rapp glanced back and saw the arcing laser light of the tracers sweeping across the ISIS force. He kept pushing, dropping his rifle to get rid of as much weight as possible as he angled down a steep slope. It was a risky move that could give ISIS the high ground, but if he moved fast enough, it would provide temporary cover.

The door gun went silent, replaced by the roar of rotors. The chopper came in low enough for him to feel the pressure of its downdraft. The skids were still two feet above the ground when Rapp dove through the open door. Mason started climbing again as Mohammed pulled Rapp the rest of the way inside and Gaffar opened up with the door gun again. The terrorists managed to get off a few shots, but none came anywhere near them as they turned toward the sunrise.