

# 1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *TOTAL POWER*

VINCE  
FLYNN

CAPTURE

OR

KILL

A MITCH RAPP NOVEL  
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ATRIA

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To Vince—thank you for Mitch Rapp. I hope this book makes you proud.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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WHILE this book draws upon some of the actual elements surrounding the raid to capture or kill Osama bin Laden, it is still a work of fiction. As such, I took certain artistic liberties with timelines and events. My meddling aside, this part remains true—on May 2, 2011, twenty-three Navy SEALs brought justice to the man responsible for the worst terrorist attacks on US soil in our nation's history.

As a grateful American, I wish to say this to the countless men and women who made Operation Neptune Spear possible:

*Thank you.*

# PROLOGUE

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APRIL 17, 2011  
ISFAHAN, IRAN

THE demonstration was a bit dramatic for Azad Ashani's taste.

Then again, he was surrounded by dramatic people.

In a setting that was markedly at odds with the confidence displayed by the Quds Force operatives in charge of the demonstration, Ashani stood at the edge of a granite cliff overlooking a sprawling valley. The night was gentle in comparison to the day's brutal heat, and even though it hadn't rained in weeks, Ashani thought he could taste a hint of moisture in the air.

Or perhaps that was just wishful thinking.

In Ashani's opinion, this entire gathering was held together by naivete, misplaced hope, and blind vengeance.

A cough racked his thin frame.

Turning, he spat a wad of phlegm onto the rocky soil. Though the demonstration's fiery culmination still flickered from the rocks rimming the base of the cliff, the flames were much too far away to illuminate the color of his saliva.

No matter.

Ashani knew its hue all the same.

Red.

It was always red.

Withdrawing a red handkerchief from his pocket, Ashani ran the soft fabric over his cracked lips. He'd done an admirable job of hiding his symptoms thus far, but those days were quickly coming to an end. Ashani might be a master spy, but he was no magician. Sooner or later, he would experience a coughing fit in the wrong company, or the doctor he'd sworn to secrecy would whisper in the wrong ears, or the cocktail of medications masking his symptoms would cease to be effective. One way or another, the disease devouring his innards would make its presence known.

He was standing at the edge of a precipice in more ways than one.

"What is this madness?"

The question, though whispered, was not one that he could afford to ignore.

Ashani was in his late fifties, with a slim build and average stature. Though not physically imposing, he still inspired fear. As head of his nation's Ministry of Intelligence, or MOIS, Ashani led an

organization with a bloody history. Conversation ceased at Ashani's appearance. Those who saw him on the street often crossed to the other side of the road.

But a man in his position had enemies.

Ashani had begun his career as a paramilitary officer, and he was a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War. He no longer had an operator's muscled build, but there was a hardness to him. A sharp edge that even age and the ravages of his illness couldn't entirely dull. For the most part, his adversaries were external to the organization he led.

For the most part.

But a knife thrust wasn't any less deadly just because it came from a trusted lieutenant rather than a barbarian at the gates.

"I think the choice of venue is... inspired," Ashani said.

His questioner snorted.

Ashani had served in the MOIS his entire life, rising to the rank of "minister" half a dozen years ago. Even so, the man standing next to Ashani was a mystery. True power in the Islamic Republic of Iran rested not with the nation's president or any of the popularly elected officials who exercised pseudo governing authority in the parliament. These offices were just for show. A mechanism to convince the populace that they actually had a degree of say in the manner in which their nation was run.

They did not.

True power resided in just one body—the Guardian Council.

This conclave of twelve men consisted of six Shia clerics and six lawyers. The Supreme Leader, a cleric named Ali Hoseini-Nassiri, reigned over the council. This arrangement meant that the Islamic Republic of Iran was governed according to the whims of an eighty-year-old Shia imam. An elderly theocrat whose last remaining earthly wish was to witness the apocalyptic battle that would bring about the return of the fabled Twelfth Imam. Ashani did not think that the combination of a dictator fixated on leaving a legacy of blood and ashes and a cadre of sycophants singularly focused on providing him with the means to do so was a harbinger of good fortune for the nation he loved.

But he was not foolish enough to say this to the man standing next to him.

The man in question, Darian Moradi, was a relative newcomer to the MOIS. Prior to his appointment as Ashani's deputy a month earlier, the young cleric hadn't held an official position in government. Instead, he'd served as the adjutant to a ranking member of the Guardian Council.

A cleric who could very well be Iran's next Supreme Leader.

Unlike Hoseini-Nassiri, Moradi's boss seemed less focused on the never-ending quest to destroy Iran's Jewish neighbor and more on stabilizing the regime through normalization with the rest of the world.

This made Moradi's question both interesting and dangerous.

"Inspired by the magnificent vista?" Moradi said. "Or the giant man-made sinkhole?"

Ashani stood on the eastern side of the plateau. Behind him, the mountain continued skyward. The drivable trail that led from the mountain's base ended at the plateau, becoming a rocky path passable only to donkeys or goats. The plateau's other occupants were gathered at the western side of the terrain feature about seventy meters distant. Their jubilant voices carried across the open ground as they gestured toward the flames licking the metallic wreckage strewn across the valley floor.



No doubt the venue was chosen in part to showcase the clear night.

In part.

There were plenty of places in Iran that offered a commanding view of the sky along with the requisite room needed to catch large chunks of smoldering aluminum and plastic as they fell to the earth. The decision to hold the demonstration here undoubtedly had much to do with what had once been concealed beneath tons of cement and steel on the valley floor.

But agreeing and voicing that agreement were two different things.

Ashani eyed his companion.

At first glance, Moradi was nothing remarkable. His beard was the prescribed length, his circular turban sparkling white, and his gray *qabaa* robe elegantly tailored. Though he was ostensibly Ashani's second-in-command, the cleric clearly maintained an open line of communication with his former boss. Even so, Moradi was respectful to Ashani and did not flaunt his obvious political connections. His thin frame showed none of the corpulence often associated with Iran's ruling elite, and his short stature was not aided by platform shoes. Most importantly, the dark eyes present behind his clear framed glasses were sharp and thoughtful.

The eyes of someone who saw much but spoke little.

In their admittedly limited interactions, Ashani had yet to put the man in a box. Moradi asked intelligent questions, did not trade on his former boss's influence, and wasn't prone to ravings meant to demonstrate his religious fervor. He reminded Ashani of a particularly keen aide-de-camp. This was a man with whom it would be easy to let down one's guard.

Which was why Ashani intended to do the opposite.

"It is a very nice evening," Ashani allowed.

This was true.

April and May were two of the more pleasant months in Isfahan. The bitter cold of winter was a thing of the past and the spring rain briefly returned life to the desert. Only two weeks ago, Ashani would have needed a thick coat and gloves to survive the brutal winds that buffeted the cliff face, but tonight the temperature hovered around 18 degrees Celsius and the breeze felt gentle and warm.

"You are a cautious one," Moradi said with a chuckle. "Willing to discuss the weather but no words for the sea of flashing red lights?"

The red lights in question winked from atop the type of portable barriers that normally heralded a stretch of road marred by construction. But the constellation of crimson beacons blinking from the valley floor had a different purpose. Ashani was not a civil engineer, but he didn't believe anything would be built upon the concrete cairn the barriers ringed in this lifetime.

Or even the next.

The barriers were meant to prevent the unwary from venturing too close to a radioactive cavern. A cavern that had once contained the centrifuges and feeder reactor that were critical to Iran's nuclear weapons program. Billions of dollars lay beneath the rubble.

Billions the Islamic Republic of Iran did not have.

Ashani sighed.

This was the second time the cleric had brought up the elephant in the room.

"What happened here was a tragedy," Ashani said.

“How many died?”

Ashani turned from his contemplation of the massive crater to find the little cleric’s eyes on him. This time no merriment shone from their depths.

“Too many,” Ashani said.

“You were almost one of them.”

Moradi’s response seemed more statement than question, but Ashani knew he still owed the cleric an answer.

“Yes.”

“What do you think about the disaster?” Moradi said.

“The loss of life was tragic,” Ashani said. “The perpetrators should be brought to justice.”

“Yes, yes,” Moradi said, waving away Ashani’s answer. “You are suitably outraged, and we must swear vengeance on the Americans, the Jews, the Kurds, or whoever sabotaged our supposedly impenetrable nuclear weapons research facility. I will save us both the trouble and pretend that you regurgitated the appropriate rhetoric, but you’ve misunderstood my question. I want to know what you think about the site’s purpose—the development of an atomic bomb.”

This time Ashani didn’t have to fake his reaction.

Though the two men were standing apart from the huddle of figures gathered at the cliff’s edge, Ashani still couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. Belief in the necessity of the Iranian nuclear weapons program was canonical in its fervor. Tens of billions had been spent on the effort, and the ensuing international sanctions had crippled Iran’s economy. Even so, continued adherence to this strategy wasn’t given any more thought than questioning why water was wet.

It simply was.

Moradi might as well have been asking Ashani if he believed that Muhammad was Allah’s prophet. Ashani hoped for a coughing fit or some other excuse not to speak. A burst of laughter echoed from the group of men clustered at the far side of the bluff.

Fools.

They were all fools.

A gaggle of clerics from the Guardian Council in their formal robes, the vice president of Iran in his Western-style suit, and the man who’d conceived this plot—a Quds Force colonel.

Originally brought into existence by the first Supreme Leader with the goal of safeguarding the resistance, Quds Force had become a nation within a nation. Ashani often thought of them as akin to the Nazis’ feared Schutzstaffel, or SS. Operatives answerable only to the Supreme Leader himself. That these fanatics were responsible for tonight’s demonstration and the scheme it supposedly validated came as no surprise.

That Iran’s ruling class was considering their plan was.

While Moradi’s former boss was not in attendance, tonight’s gathering included power brokers from across the Iranian government. This event was indicative of a seismic shift in Iran’s approach to the West. A shift Ashani suspected would prove to be the undoing of the nation he loved.

*Where did that leave him?*

“What I think about the program is immaterial,” Ashani said, choosing his words carefully. “I do not make policy decisions. I serve the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Supreme Leader Ali Hoseini-

Nassiri.”

“Of course you do,” Moradi said with a smirk, “but what about the operation the Quds Force operatives are proposing? If you were the Supreme Leader’s advisor, would you counsel that such a venture was wise?”

Ashani would not.

Yes, what the Quds Force imagined had a chance of working, and yes, even he had to admit that their operational planning was impressive. But as the concrete tomb at the base of the cliff could attest, grand schemes often led to grand failures. The flames consuming the downed aircraft’s wreckage looked more like a funeral pyre than a victory bonfire.

“If the Supreme Leader desired my thoughts, I would provide them,” Ashani said, locking eyes with the cleric, “but my words would be for him alone.”

Moradi held his gaze for an uncomfortably long time before slowly turning away. As a career intelligence officer, Ashani prided himself on his ability to read people, but he couldn’t tell what the cleric was thinking.

“This is madness,” Moradi said, whispering the words. “Absolute madness. And no one can stop it.”

Moradi strode away before Ashani could reply, which was just as well, since he wasn’t sure how he would have responded. Yes, this was madness. If the Quds Force plot succeeded, there was a very real chance the Middle East would be plunged into a regional war. If it failed, the radioactive cavern at the cliff’s base would look like a playground in comparison to what the Americans would do to his country.

Ashani was in violent agreement with Moradi on the cleric’s first point.

Not the second.

There was someone who could stop this rush to madness. A man who terrified Ashani in a way that even the disease consuming him did not. Sometimes survival required a willingness to do the unthinkable. Ashani was a dead man, but perhaps his wife and daughters didn’t need to share his fate.

It was time to make a deal with the devil.

A devil known as *Malikul Mawt*.

*The Angel of Death.*

# CHAPTER 1

---

FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 2011  
ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

“I’m taking this chair.”

The muscular Pakistani man grabbed the chair in question and dragged it across AstroTurf-coated concrete to the far side of the patio. He didn’t wait for a reply from the table’s occupant. The Pakistani’s companion, a pretty brunette, frowned at her date’s boorish behavior. Though the sun had long since set and the evening’s unseasonably muggy air settled on the shoulders of her robin-egg blue *shalwar kameez* like a thick cotton blanket, she still shivered.

Sunrise Café was a trendy spot, and its outdoor courtyard was much in demand. The patio was populated by white wicker tables and matching chairs adorned with plush red cushions. Potted plants surrounded the seating area and hung from wooden adornments while cooling electric fans provided a semblance of a breeze.

The breeze had not caused the woman’s shiver.

Something about the slim man seated alone at the far side of the café gave her pause. Though there was nothing about his manner to suggest that he’d understood what her boyfriend had said, or taken offense at her date’s rude actions, the woman could not shake her sense of unease.

The man had an olive complexion and thick, black hair that had begun to gray at the temples. He could have passed for a half a dozen nationalities, but his expensive linen slacks, tailored sport coat, and silk dress shirt worn open at the collar had a European flair. He hadn’t so much as looked up from his paper during the earlier interaction, but as if he could feel her gaze, he did so now.

The woman swallowed.

Though the man’s face bore no malice, his eyes made her stomach tremble. The black orbs stared through her, and she shivered a second time.

“Sorry,” the woman said, mouthing the word.

The man gazed at her for a beat longer.

Then, he slowly nodded.

“Sorry for what?” her date said. “Him? He’s nothing.”

The woman smiled at her companion as he settled into his chair. “I’m sure you’re right,” she said. Her boyfriend was not right.

The man had gone back to his paper and a sense of calm settled over the patio, though the woman couldn't help but think that it was the calm before a storm.

---

Mitch Rapp was accustomed to being underestimated.

To be fair, Rapp made a practice of appearing as something other than he was. This was not so much because he was embarrassed about his vocation as that what he did for a living wasn't often discussed in polite company.

Rapp was a professional killer.

"FAIRBANKS confirmed. I say again, FAIRBANKS confirmed, over."

Rapp fought the urge to grind his teeth at the radio transmission, choosing instead to vent his frustration on his espresso. Selecting the unsuspecting spoon lying adjacent to the ceramic cup, he stirred the dark contents with an altogether unnecessary vigor.

Rapp knew that the man currently making his way down School Road toward Sunrise Café had been given the CIA code name FAIRBANKS. He knew that the Pakistani businessman owned homes on three continents. Rapp knew that he walked with an altered gait because of a cricket injury that had occurred at age twelve, that his hook nose curved slightly to the left, and that his right cheek sported a trio of pockmarks courtesy of a bout of measles.

Pockmarks that formed a precise isosceles triangle.

Rapp also knew that FAIRBANKS was a shitbag of the first order.

He knew all this because Rapp had been hunting FAIRBANKS for the better part of five years and, after finding him, had personally pitched this operation to Irene Kennedy, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and Rapp's boss. Rapp no more needed a CIA analyst who was watching FAIRBANKS's route of travel from miles away, courtesy of a clandestine camera to verify the businessman's identity, than he needed help picking out his own mother from across the kitchen table.

But the voice was whispering in his ear all the same.

With a final stir of the swirling liquid, Rapp tapped the spoon on the edge of his cup before setting the utensil on the saucer's edge. The silverware's placement was perfect, exactly ninety degrees from the cup and without a drop of liquid to foul the white tablecloth or the precisely folded newspaper lying to the cup's left. This level of attention to detail was not because he suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder or because he had a particular penchant for table manners.

No, his current behavior was driven by something else.

His legend.

While his features and polyglot ability permitted Rapp to pass for a number of nationalities, the Bordeaux-colored passport in his sport coat pocket proclaimed him a proud citizen of the République française and he intended to behave as such. Rapp was well traveled enough to know that not every French businessman was a caricature of the anal, self-absorbed Frog lampooned by American popular culture, but the stereotype existed for a reason. For the most part, people saw what they expected to see, and when the events of the next few moments were over, Rapp fervently hoped that his fellow Islamabad diners remembered a meticulous Frenchman occupying the table closest to the pedestrian path.

If they remembered anything at all.

“IRONMAN, please confirm you received our last transmission, over.”

On the pretext of scratching an itch, Rapp sent an index finger deep into his ear canal and removed a tiny flesh-colored receiver. He ruffled his paper to distract any wandering eyes even as he deposited the pea-size bit of electronics into his coffee, where it promptly sank from sight. Though he knew his actions would necessitate a sit-down with Irene when he returned stateside, Rapp already felt better.

The same could not be said of his earpiece.

An operational team was sometimes merited, but this was not the case tonight. Rapp had begun his CIA employment by working as a singleton. A lone killer. He hadn't worked alone because he was some sort of antisocial vigilante. Rapp operated solo because he was good.

Very good.

The kind of good in which additional operational support tended to become a hindrance rather than a help. Saddling Rapp with extra shooters when he didn't need them was the equivalent of teaming Kobe Bryant with players from a local high school. Unless Rapp picked his teammates, the other operatives just got in the way.

And he had not picked this team.

As if summoned by his thoughts, his burner phone vibrated.

Rapp reached into his pocket and powered down the device.

While he considered the earpiece gracing the bottom of his coffee cup extraneous, the same could not be said of his phone. There was a difference between being headstrong and acting foolishly. In roughly three minutes, Rapp intended to rid the earth of a particularly vile human being, and he had no intention of following his prey into the afterlife. To escape, Rapp would need the burner phone, so he permitted the device's continued presence, but he did not need the distraction poised by whoever was currently texting him.

A car pulled up to the curb on Rapp's left.

He allowed his gaze to settle on the vehicle with the same casual interest that might be displayed by any of the café's patrons.

Rapp's interest was not casual.

FAIRBANKS did not owe his survival to good fortune. While Rapp had been in the field long enough to understand the role that luck played in any operation, this alone was not enough to keep a man safe from a predator with Rapp's abilities.

FAIRBANKS was still alive because he'd had help.

Help of the kind only a nation-state could provide.

By killing FAIRBANKS, Mitch intended to send the government who had aided and abetted his evil an unambiguous message—the old rules no longer applied. Nearly a decade after nineteen jihadis had perpetrated the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor, the war on terror had reached an inflection point. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan could either help the United States track down and eliminate terrorists or suffer the consequences.

A blunt message to be delivered by a blunt-force object.

The car door opened, and a man exited.

But not just any man.

Colonel Dariush Ruyintan stood not more than a stone's throw from Rapp's table.

Though Rapp was a veteran of countless clandestine operations, the sight of Ruyintan rocked him to his core. The Iranian Quds Force expeditionary commander had more American blood on his hands than any single individual save perhaps Osama bin Laden himself. He had funded the work into explosively formed penetrators and had masterminded the ratlines through which the devices had poured into Iraq from Iran. Though the US troop surge had stabilized Iraq and saved the war, Ruyintan had been the one who'd made it necessary. The intelligence officer had been so successful at countering American anti-insurgency efforts that Irene had lobbied to replace the head of Al Qaeda with Ruyintan as the number one counterterrorism target.

The CIA director hadn't won that battle, but she'd had a pointed conversation with her top counterterrorism operative all the same. If Rapp ever found himself able to eliminate the Iranian, he was to do so. Fate had just served up the opportunity of a lifetime, but there was a problem.

Rapp already had someone else to kill.

## CHAPTER 2

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THE Iranian colonel entered the café's outdoor seating area in a scrum of bodies.

Rapp eyed the protective detail with the disdain a well-heeled Frenchman would show a cluster of suit-clad ruffians who had deigned to interrupt his final espresso of the night. But underneath Rapp's disgusted expression, he was evaluating the men with an assassin's practiced eyes.

The detail was good.

Though Rapp rated Iranian Quds Force members only slightly higher than the black scorpion he'd mashed into his hotel room floor this morning, he did not allow his derision for who they were and what they believed to influence his assessment of their martial capabilities.

Only fools and dead men underestimated Iranians.

Mitch was neither.

The protective detail flowed across the open patio like an ocean wave cresting a sand castle. The six men were dressed in business formal—suits, lace-up shoes, and dress shirts open at the collar. The suits were high-quality, and the jackets were worn unbuttoned.

The bodies beneath were lean and hard.

Rapp had been killing men long enough to recognize the difference between protective details that used bulk to deter would-be attackers and those who relied on training. Thick-necked, muscle-bound 'roid-heads might dissuade drunk frat boys in a college bar, but they were ineffective against professionals.

By comparison, Ruyintan's detail looked like a pack of hyenas.

The men didn't attempt to intimidate through sheer physicality. Instead, their cold eyes and blank expressions did the talking. The two lead bodyguards swept past Rapp and continued into the café proper. The remaining four boxed Ruyintan as he ambled up the cobblestone sidewalk leading from the street to the café's synthetic-turf-covered patio.

Rapp watched the procession long enough to make eye contact with the colonel before returning his gaze to his newspaper. The Iranian's show of force was impressive, but Rapp's legend proclaimed him a businessman who helped interested parties navigate tiresome regulations. The kind of regulations meant to curb the sale of illegal firearms.

Men with guns weren't exactly a novelty.

*"Pardonnez-moi, monsieur, aidez-moi, s'il vous plait?"*

The Iranian bodyguard spoke in accented but understandable French. His lean build mirrored that of his companions, but his shoulders were heavier and chest broader. A middleweight surrounded by



welterweights. He had a pugilist's flattened nose, and his misshapen knuckles were crisscrossed with scars. His foot placement suggested boxing, but his cauliflower ears pointed toward a passion for wrestling. Either way, this was not a man to be taken lightly. The bodyguard stood a respectful distance from Mitch, but his posture suggested the question was not rhetorical.

Rapp decided to put this theory to the test.

"*Non,*" Mitch said, turning the page on his newspaper as he spoke. His semi-slouch radiated a disinterest that was starkly at odds with the tendrils of tension tightening his stomach. FAIRBANKS was nothing if not punctual. In just seconds, the Pakistani businessman would be rounding the corner, no doubt eagerly anticipating a nightcap at his favorite coffee shop.

Rapp had endured more oversight during the planning phase of this sanctioned assassination than the last dozen combined. As evidenced by the clandestine camera array and the voice that had been formerly whispering in his ear, killing a scumbag on the streets of an ally's capital city was not an insignificant act.

Even toward an ally as fickle as Pakistan.

Sending a message was all well and good, but doing so effectively required a certain subtlety. Rapp was the first to admit that the word *subtle* was not a descriptor often applied to him, but in this case he agreed with the strategy. FAIRBANKS needed to die in a manner that left no misunderstanding as to the cause of his demise while still throwing enough doubt on the identity of the perpetrators to allow the Pakistani government to express public outrage while privately realizing they'd been given an ultimatum.

This message would be infinitely harder to send if the Iranian's guard dogs ran Mitch out of the café. Ruyintan mounted the café's steps and strode across the AstroTurf. But rather than heading for the coffee shop's welcoming front door, the Iranian angled left.

Toward Rapp's table.

## CHAPTER 3

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“EXCUSE me, sir,” Ruyintan said. “Do you mind if I join you?”

Rapp did mind.

Besides the fact that he could see FAIRBANKS’s gray-streaked hair as he meandered down the street to his left, Rapp had a thing about sharing tables with Iranian colonels.

But Ruyintan wasn’t one to take no for an answer.

Before Rapp could reply, the Quds Force operative appropriated a chair from a nearby table and sat. That the chair had only moments before held the same muscular Pakistani man who’d originally stolen it from Rapp seemed of little concern to the Iranian. Two of the colonel’s bodyguards emerged from the café and helpfully explained to the enraged musclehead that his latte would taste much better if he chose to finish it inside the café.

The Iranians’ persuasive words seemed to calm him.

Or maybe it was sight of pistols bulging from shoulder holsters.

Either way, the man stormed into the café, and his date got up from her seat and meekly followed. As the pretty woman drew even with Rapp, she graced him with a tentative smile and then disappeared inside.

When it came to women or chairs, there really was no accounting for taste.

A second pair of guards positioned themselves to either side of Mitch’s shoulders and the final pair faced the road.

“Sorry,” Mitch said, ignoring the skin-crawling feeling that adversaries in his blind spot always produced, “but I’m expecting someone.”

“Not just someone,” Ruyintan said. “You are waiting for a certain Pakistani businessman. He thinks he’s meeting Monsieur Dubois to discuss a rather sizable acquisition. But that isn’t so, is it? You might have a maroon passport, but the Republic is not the land of your birth any more than French is your native tongue. Your given name is actually *Saeed. Farid Saeed.*”

Ruyintan had been speaking in French until he’d arrived at the final sentence. Those words had been rendered in Arabic, perhaps to give the nom de guerre the emphasis it deserved.

Not much surprised Mitch.

This did.

Mitch returned the colonel’s gaze.

The Iranian was both as Rapp expected him to be in person and different. Ruyintan’s appearance basically tracked the dossier photos the CIA had compiled on the Quds Force expeditionary

commander over the years. Though he was dressed in the same Western-style business casual attire of his men, it was clear that Ruyintan was not some boardroom banker.

Or at least it was clear to Rapp.

Ruyintan's coal-colored hair was sprinkled with gray and stylishly cut. His obligatory beard was trimmed close to the skin and his TV-ready face was that of a politician rather than a warrior. But a closer look at the wrinkles around his eyes and the sun marks on his forehead suggested that this was the visage of a man who'd spent the majority of his life outdoors.

And not the sort of outdoors associated with a country club's golf course.

As the faint pucker on his right cheekbone could attest, Ruyintan led his troops from the front lines, not a cushy command post in Tehran. Though the blemish could have been attributed to childhood acne, Rapp knew the mark's true source—a 5.56mm round.

*An American 5.56mm round.*

Ruyintan had sustained the wound in Fallujah, Iraq, when a Marine rifleman's shot had cratered the stucco wall next to him rather than his skull. The metal fragments had just missed the colonel's eye. Rapp had wondered on more than one occasion how many US lives might have been saved if the Marine's aim had been true, but it was Ruyintan's presence rather than his appearance that surprised Rapp the most. The air surrounding the Quds Force commander seemed charged with electricity. As if the Iranian were a lightning bolt poised to strike. Though he'd encountered them sparingly, Rapp had met such men before.

Dangerous men.

Ruyintan had begun the conversation in a manner meant to startle Rapp, which meant that he had an expected fraction of a second to decide how to respond. Maybe up to an entire second if he pushed his luck. For most people, a single second wasn't much time.

Rapp wasn't most people.

In the time required to draw a breath, Rapp ran through several potential courses of action. In his left breast pocket, Rapp carried a pen that, when triggered in a very specific manner, emitted 5 ccs of slow-acting neurotoxin. Since FAIRBANKS traveled with bodyguards, Rapp had expected to be frisked prior to their sit-down. As such, he was not carrying his customary Glock and suppressor, but even a man with Rapp's abilities did not prowl the streets of Islamabad unarmed.

A knife featuring a four-inch ceramic blade and a 3-D printed hilt formed the latching mechanism on Rapp's belt. The weapon would never win an award for sexiest killing implement, but it was custom-made for Rapp's hand, easily concealed, and couldn't be discovered by a metal detector. Rapp was confident that he could end Ruyintan's life before one of his bodyguards intervened. What happened next would be a bit of a free-for-all, but Mitch liked his odds.

Even so, he did not give in to his homicidal urge.

Yet.

Over the course of their years working together, Rapp had grudgingly come around to Irene's way of thinking when it came to the big fish. The men who ordered foot soldiers into harm's way should be afforded the same opportunity to meet Allah as their underlings.

But sometimes, there was a benefit in delaying their departure.

Small fish were a dime a dozen. Big fish, on other hand, could serve as bait for an even larger catch. So rather than shove the dull end of his teaspoon through the Iranian's right eyeball, Rapp decided to do something even more shocking.

Talk.

"What do you want?" Rapp said.

Following the Iranian's lead, Rapp asked the question in Arabic, but unlike the Quds Force officer's Persian-accented vowels and consonants, Mitch's had an Iraqi flavor. In a turn of events that had delighted Stan Hurley and flummoxed agency linguists, Rapp spoke Arabic with a pronounced Iraqi accent.

A Mosul accent, to be precise.

Some people were born to compose symphonies or solve mathematical equations.

Mitch was created to hunt his nation's enemies.

"I want to propose a way that our two organizations can achieve a common goal," Ruyintan said.

The cloud of gray hair representing FAIRBANKS paused at the café's entrance.

Then he continued down the sidewalk.

Rapp kept his outward expression blank, but inside he seethed.

His meeting with the Pakistani businessman had been the result of months of intelligence work. Untold resources had been dedicated to finding the man, developing a pattern of life, constructing an interdiction plan, and moving the required assets into place. And this was to say nothing of the hoops Rapp had to jump through to get this killing sanctioned. All told, the operation easily represented a year of Rapp's life, and that year was now vanishing down an Islamabad side street.

Rapp was livid.

Farid Saeed was not.

Rapp had spent years perfecting the Saeed persona. A former officer in Saddam's army turned illicit businessman. Most former Iraqi army officers chose one of two paths: criminality or terrorism. As members of the Baath party, the soldiers were Sunni in a Shia-majority country and quickly found themselves targets of Iranian-sponsored militias on the lookout for a little payback after years of suppression under the Iraqi strongman's rule. With a choice between starvation or execution, it wasn't hard to understand why these former soldiers rarely became upstanding members of the Iraqi community.

Farid Saeed was no exception.

"What goal?" Rapp said.

Rapp was genuinely interested in the Iranian's answer.

The Saeed legend had been developed to provide Mitch with the freedom to move across the Islamic crescent without attracting attention. Rapp was not a traditional case officer. His efforts were dedicated to hunting men, not converting them to CIA assets. As such, he hadn't tried to use his bona fides to penetrate terrorist organizations or recruit informants. That he'd come to the attention of Iranian intelligence was not surprising, but the fact that he was known by name by one of the Quds Force's most dangerous operatives was an unforeseen but not necessarily unwelcome development.

Regardless of what the Iranian said next, Rapp was certain he'd have a ready reply.

"The goal of killing Americans in Afghanistan," Ruyintan said.