

# PROLOGUE

Fall 2001

*Shamali Plain, north of Kabul, Afghanistan*

JOHN WELLS TIPPED his head to the sky, searching for a pair of F-15s circling slowly above in the darkness. Even during the day the American jets were difficult to spot. Now, with the sun hidden behind the mountains, they were all but invisible. Wells could only hope their pilots hadn't seen him either, for the bombs on their wings could obliterate him and his men in an instant.

From the cockpits of those jets, the war looked like a video game, Wells thought. Little gray men ran silently across computer screens an inch at a time until bombs landed with white blasts. The reality on the ground was messier, bones and blood replacing pixels. Wells's mind slid to a Sunday morning many years before, his dad, a surgeon, the best cutter in western Montana, walking into the kitchen after a night in the operating room, washing his hands compulsively in the sink.

"What happened, Dad?" Wells had said that morning. "Was it bad?"

He was ten, old enough to know that he wasn't supposed to ask those questions, but curiosity overcame him. Herbert turned off the sink and dried his hands, poured himself a cup of coffee, and fixed Wells with his weary blue eyes. Wells was about to apologize for

overstepping his bounds when his father finally spoke, the answer not what Wells expected.

“Everything depends which side of the shotgun you’re on,” Herbert said. And sipped his coffee, as if daring his son to press him further. Wells hadn’t understood then, but he did now. Truer words had never been said. He wondered what his father, two years gone, would think of the man he’d become. He had just started down his path when Herbert had passed on, and if his dad had had any thoughts on the matter he’d kept them to himself.

“You’ve got the hands to be a surgeon, John,” Herbert said once when Wells was in college, but when Wells didn’t respond Herbert dropped the subject. His dad always told him that he’d have to make his own path, that the world was no place for weaklings. Wells supposed he’d learned that lesson too well. A killer, not a doctor, aiming to make wounds no surgeon could undo. Yet somehow he thought that Herbert would understand the need for men like him. Hoped, anyway.

WELLS GAVE UP looking for the jets but kept his eyes raised. In this land without electricity the stars and moon glowed with a brightness he had grown to love. He silently named all the constellations he could remember, until a blast of wind filled his eyes with dust and pulled his attention to earth.

Ahmed, his lieutenant, stepped across the firepit and stood beside him. “Cold,” Ahmed said quietly in Arabic.

“*Nam.*” Yes.

The wind had worsened by the day, an icy breeze sweeping down from the north with the promise of the bitter winter to come. Tonight the gusts were especially strong, kicking up ash from the fire Wells and his men had built, mocking their efforts to stay warm. Wells cinched his blanket around his shoulders and stepped closer to the men huddled around the low fire. He would have liked a stronger flame, but he could not risk the attention of the jets.

“It will be a long winter.”

“Yes,” Wells said.

“Or perhaps a short one.” A grim smile crossed Ahmed’s face. “Perhaps we will be in paradise before spring.”

“Maybe the sheikh will send us all on vacation,” Wells said, indulging himself in a rare joke. “Or a hajj,” the pilgrimage to Mecca that every devout Muslim was supposed to make at least once.

At the mention of the hajj the sneer disappeared from Ahmed’s lips. “*Inshallah*, Jalal,” he said reverently. If God wills.

“*Inshallah*,” Wells said. The Taliban and Qaeda guerrillas called him Jalal. He had taken the name years earlier, after he became the first westerner to graduate from the Qaeda camps near Kandahar. Fewer than a dozen men knew his real name. A few others called him Ameriki, the American, but not many would do so to his face. Many of the younger recruits, in fact, didn’t know he was American at all.

And why would they? Wells asked himself. After years fighting jihad in Afghanistan and Chechnya, he spoke perfect Arabic and Pashtun. His beard was long, his hands callused. He rode a horse almost as well as the natives—no outsider could truly ride like an Afghan—and he played *buzkashi*, the rough polo game they loved, as hard as they did. He prayed with them. He had proven that he belonged here, with these men.

Or so Wells hoped. What bin Laden and the other senior Qaeda leaders really thought of him he did not know. He was not sure he ever would. Especially now, with his country at war with theirs. He could not truly prove himself except by dying for them, and that he did not plan to do.

Wells shivered again, from the inside this time. Enough second-guessing. He looked at his six men, their AKs slung over their shoulders, talking quietly in the darkness. Three were Afghan, three Arab; the pressure of war had brought the Taliban and Qaeda closer than ever before. Usually, they were chatty and loud, born storytellers. But Wells was not a talker on missions, and his soldiers respected that. They were friendly enough, and battle-hardened, and they followed his orders quickly and without question. A commander couldn’t ask for more. What would happen to them tonight was unfortunate, worse than unfortunate, but it couldn’t be helped.

To the south, a bright flash lit up the night. Then another, and another.

“They’ve started again,” Ahmed said. The Americans were

bombing Kabul, the Afghan capital, thirty miles south. So far, they had ignored the Shamali Plain, the flat ground north of Kabul where the Taliban faced the Northern Alliance—the rebel Afghan army that since September 11 had become America’s new best friend.

Wells and his men had camped in a nameless village, really just a couple of huts, on a ridge overlooking the plain. They were protected by mountains to the north and west, and they had ridden horses in rather than driving the Toyota pickups favored by the Taliban. No one would bother them up here, and they could easily watch the plain below. And Wells had another reason for choosing this place, one he had not shared with his men. With any luck, there would be an American Special Forces unit in the next village north.

“Harder tonight,” Ahmed said, as the flashes continued.

“*Nam.*” Yes. Much harder. After a month of shadowboxing, the United States had opened up on Kabul. A bad sign for the Taliban, already reeling from the collapse of its defenses in the north. Supposedly impenetrable cities had fallen after a few days of American bombing.

But tonight the Taliban had a surprise for the Northern Alliance. Wells looked south, where a rutted road rose out of Kabul and onto the plain. There they were. Headlights, streaming north. A dozen vehicles in close convoy, a break, and a dozen more. Pickups with mounted .50-caliber machine guns in their beds. Five-ton troop transports holding twenty soldiers each. The moon rose in the sky and the headlights kept coming. Another dozen, and another. The Taliban were grouping to attack the Northern Alliance front line.

The trucks cut their lights as they approached the line. Wells pulled out his night-vision binoculars—his only luxury, taken off an unlucky Russian major in Chechnya—and scanned the valley below. Hundreds of trucks had massed. Maybe three thousand soldiers in all, Afghan and Arab. Here to defend Kabul from the infidels who wanted to let women show their faces in public. If the Talibs broke through the Northern Alliance’s front line, they might be able to retake much of what they had lost. Wells’s unit had been sent to look for signs that the Alliance had learned of the attack. So far, he saw no defensive preparations.

Wells handed Ahmed the binoculars. “It is true, then?”

“*Nam*. We attack tonight.”

“Can we win?”

A month ago Ahmed’s question would have been unthinkable. The American bombing had hurt the confidence of the Taliban more than Wells had realized.

“Of course,” he said. “*Inshallah*.” In truth, Wells admired the plan’s boldness. The Taliban would take the fight to the enemy rather than waiting to die in their bunkers. But the massed Talib soldiers would be a ripe target for the jets overhead. To succeed, the Taliban troops would need to punch through the Northern Alliance front lines quickly. Then Talib and Alliance soldiers would be mixed in close combat. The Americans would be unable to bomb without destroying their allies as well as their enemies.

The Taliban troops below broke into company-sized groups, readying themselves to move forward.

They never had the chance.

The bombs began falling almost as soon as the last truck of soldiers reached the front line. Blasts tore through the night, exploding white and red on the plain below Wells like upside-down fireworks. Sharp cracks and long heavy thumps came randomly, three or four in quick succession followed by long pauses. Their force shook the huts where Wells and his men stood, and one blast lit the night with a huge red fireball.

“Must have been an ammunition truck,” Wells said, half to himself, half to Ahmed.

THE BARRAGE SEEMED to last for hours, but when it ended and Wells checked his watch he found that only forty minutes had passed. He raised his binoculars to examine the plain below. Fires licked the wrecked bodies of pickups and five-ton trucks. Men lay scattered across the hard ground. The Americans had been waiting all along, and the Talibs had driven into the trap. Which meant that a Special Forces unit was hidden nearby, directing the bombardment. Just as Wells had hoped.

His men were silent now, shocked by what they had seen. Below, the Talibs were trying to regroup, but now the Northern Alliance had opened up with machine guns and mortars. And another round

of bombing was surely coming. Without surprise, the Taliban had no chance.

Wells lowered the binoculars. "Let's go," he said.

"Back?" Ahmed said.

Wells shook his head and pointed north, over the folds of the ridge. "Americans are up there aiming the bombs." Ahmed looked surprised but said nothing. Wells had been right before, and in any case as commander he could do what he liked.

They saddled up and rode north in the darkness. Unlike the spectacular mountains of northern Afghanistan, the Shamali ridge was stunted and uneven, low hills of crumbling stone and dirt. They traveled in single file at a steady trot, led by Hamid, their best horseman. Beneath them the bombs fell again. A few headlights were already moving south toward Kabul, the Taliban's attack fading before it even began.

"Slow," Wells said, as his squad neared the crest of a hill north of their encampment. He was sure the American unit had picked a position similar to the one he had chosen. Wells and his men came over the hill and stopped. Ahead, the ground dipped, then rose again. Wells looked through his binoculars. There they were, a half dozen men standing beside a cluster of mud huts, peering down at the Taliban front lines. They could be villagers, roused by the bombing . . . but they weren't. They were American. The proof was in the pickup half-hidden behind a hut.

The truck meant that the SF guys would have a SAW—a light machine gun—or maybe a .50-caliber, a bigger weapon than anything his men carried. But Wells and his squad would have surprise on their side. Wells waved his men forward, warning them to be quiet. They were excited now, excited at the chance to attack Americans. And Wells, though he hated to admit it, was excited too.

### *U.S.S. Starker, Atlantic Ocean*

The ride out had been smooth, but Jennifer Exley felt her stomach clench as the helicopter landed and she stepped onto the gray metal deck of the *Starker*, fifty miles east of Norfolk, Virginia. In interna-

tional waters, of course, so its precious cargo would remain outside the jurisdiction of American courts.

An old navy amphibious assault ship, the *Starker* was now a brig, a floating jail. Today the vessel held just one prisoner, Tim Keifer, a.k.a. Mohammed Faisal, a twenty-two-year-old American who'd been captured fighting for the Taliban near Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan. Fighting for the Taliban *against the United States*. Exley was still trying to get her mind around that one.

The capture of John Walker Lindh, the other American Taliban, had been broadcast worldwide. But Keifer's detention had stayed quiet. President Bush had signed an order declaring Keifer an "enemy combatant" and suspending his rights, including his access to American courts. Now Keifer was literally floating in a steel limbo, a place where U.S. laws did not apply. Exley wasn't sure she liked that decision, but maybe this wasn't the time to worry about little things like the Bill of Rights. The ship twisted beneath her, and she yelped as she lost her footing on the slick metal deck. Her guide, a friendly young ensign, reached out a hand and steadied her.

"You okay, Ms. Exley?"

"Fine."

He led her off the deck and down a brightly lit hallway. "Mohammed's in the hospital," the sailor said. "We try to be careful, but he keeps having accidents. Banging his head on doors, sh—" He remembered he was talking to a woman and caught himself, she saw. "*Stuff* like that."

How predictable, Exley thought. As long as they didn't kill him.

"I suppose the crew would rather throw him overboard?"

"We'd draw straws for the chance," he said brightly. "Here we are."

She showed her CIA identification and special navy pass to the two sailors posted outside Keifer's room. They eyed both carefully, then saluted her. The ensign pulled a thick metal key from his pocket and slid it into the heavy lock on the door. He pushed the door open slowly, and she stepped into the windowless room.

"Take as much time as you like, ma'am," the ensign said, closing the door behind her. "Mohammed's not going anywhere."

Keifer lay on a narrow hospital cot, hands and legs shackled to the side of the frame, an intravenous drip flowing into his arm. His beard had been shaved roughly and his hair cropped close. A yellow bruise ringed his left eye. He was skinny and small and looked like a philosophy grad student or something equally useless. He wasn't much of a flight risk, but just to be sure, a camera in the corner was trained on the bed, and two more sailors stood by the door. Either could have tossed Keifer into the Atlantic with one hand. For one tiny moment Exley felt sorry for him. Then she didn't.

UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, Exley wouldn't have spoken to Keifer. She was a handler, not an interrogator, and the CIA and DIA—the Defense Intelligence Agency, Rumsfeld's boys—had grilled Keifer for weeks. But after reading the transcripts of Keifer's interrogations, Exley and Ellis Shafer, her boss, the section head for the Near East, decided she should talk to Keifer herself.

Exley decided to be his mother. She was old enough, and he probably hadn't seen a woman in a while. She walked to the bed and put her hand on his shoulder. His drugged eyes blinked open. He shrank back, his shoulders hunching, then relaxed a little as she smiled at him.

"Tim. I'm Jen Exley."

He blinked and said nothing.

"You feeling okay?"

"What does it look like?"

Unbelievable. This dumb kid still wanted to play tough. All hundred and forty pounds of him. Fortunately, the sodium pentothal and morphine running through his veins had softened him a little. Amnesty International might have objected, but they didn't get a vote. Exley tried to arrange her face in sympathy rather than the contempt she felt. "Can I sit down?"

He shrugged, rustling his cuffs against the bed. She pulled over a chair.

"Are you a lawyer?"

"No, but I can get you one." A little lie.

"I want a lawyer," Keifer said, his voice slurred. He closed his



eyes and shook his head, slowly, metronomically, seeming to draw comfort from the motion. "They said no lawyer. I know my rights."

You're gonna have to take that up with somebody a lot more senior than me, Exley thought.

"I can help you," she said. "But you have to help me."

Again he shook his head, sullenly this time. "What do you want?"

"Tell me about the other American over there. Not John Walker Lindh. The third guy. The older one."

"I told you."

She touched his face, moved his head toward her, to give him a look at her blue eyes—her best feature, she'd always been told, even if crow's-feet had settled around them.

"Look at me, Tim. You told someone else. Not me."

She could see the fight leave his eyes as he, or the drugs in him, decided arguing wasn't worth the trouble. "They called him Jalal. One or two guys said his real name was John."

"John?"

"Maybe they had him confused with John Walker Lindh. I'm not even sure he was American. I never talked to him."

"Not once?" She hoped her voice didn't reveal her disappointment.

"No," Keifer said. He closed his eyes. Again she waited. "The place was big. He was in and out."

"He was free to come and go?"

"Seemed that way."

"What did he look like?"

"Big guy. Tall. Had a beard like everybody else."

"Any distinguishing features?"

"If there were, I didn't see any. It wasn't that kind of camp."

She leaned close to him and smiled. His breath smelled rank and acrid at the same time, like a rotten orange. They probably weren't brushing his teeth much. "Can you remember anything else?"

He seemed to be thinking. "Can I get some water?"

Exley looked at the sailor by the door. He shrugged. A stack of plastic cups sat beside a metal sink in the corner of the room. She filled one and brought it to Keifer, tipping it gently to his lips.

“Thank you.” Keifer closed his eyes. “The American—Jalal—guys said he was a real soldier. Tough. He’d been in Chechnya. That’s what they said.” He opened his eyes, looked at her. “What else can I tell you?”

What she really wanted to know were questions she wasn’t supposed to ask. How much of the Koran have you read? Do you really hate America, or was it just an adventure? By the way, when are your friends going to hit us next? Where? How?

And as long as she was chewing over unaskable, unanswerable questions, how about this one: Whose side is he on? Jalal, that is. John Wells. The only CIA agent ever to penetrate al Qaeda. A man whose existence was known to fewer than a dozen agency officials. A singular national asset.

Except that the singular national asset hadn’t bothered to communicate with his CIA minders—in other words, with Exley—in two years. Which meant that he had been of zero help in stopping September 11. Why, John? You’re alive, and not a prisoner. This kid had confirmed that much, if nothing else. Did you not know? Or have you gone native? You always were a little crazy, or you never would have gone into those mountains. Maybe you spent too many years kneeling on prayer rugs with the bad guys. Maybe you’re one of them now.

“What else?” Exley said. “I can’t think of anything.” She put down the empty cup and stood to leave. Keifer’s eyes met hers, and now he really did look like a scared kid. He’s just beginning to understand how much trouble he’s in, she thought. Thank God he’s not my problem.

“What about the lawyer? You promised—”

“I’ll get right on it,” she said, walking out the door. “Good luck, Tim.”

WELLS AND HIS men now stood a mile from the Americans. They had left their horses a few minutes before. He led his men into a narrow saddle, a rock ridge that hid them from the American position. Once they left it they would have no cover, only open ground between them and the enemy. Exactly what Wells wanted. He had no illusions that his squad could get closer without being spotted. The

ridge was nearly treeless, and the Special Forces had night-vision equipment far superior to his goggles.

He split his men into two groups. Ahmed would lead three men north in a direct attack on the position, while Wells, Hamid, and Abdullah—the unit’s toughest fighter—would dogleg to the northwest, moving higher up the ridgeline, then swoop in from above.

“We must move quickly,” Wells said. “Before they can call in their planes. Without those they are weak.” His men clustered around him, fingering their weapons excitedly.

Now the important part. “As your commander, I declare this a martyrdom mission,” he said. The magic words. They were to fight until they died. No retreat, no surrender. “Does everyone understand?” Wells looked for signs of fear in his men. He saw none. Their eyes were steady. “We fight for the glory of Allah and Mohammed. The enemy has put himself within our grasp. Praise Allah, we will destroy him. *Allahu akbar*.”

“*Allahu akbar*,” Wells’s men said quietly. God is great. They were afraid, but excited too, Wells saw. There was no greater glory than to kill an American, or die trying.

Ahmed chambered a round into his AK and led his men out of the saddle. Wells followed, angling up the ridge. Minutes later, still a quarter mile from the Americans, he lay down behind a crumbling boulder, signaling Hamid and Abdullah to do the same. “Wait,” he said. “Ahmed attacks first.” Things would happen very fast now. He peeked around the rock. Through his binoculars, he could see the Special Forces readying for the attack, setting up their .50-cal and spreading out behind huts and boulders, not quite running but moving quickly and precisely, their training evident in every step.

When Ahmed and his men closed to one hundred yards, the Special Forces opened up on them with a fusillade that echoed across the hillside. Ahmed survived the first wave of fire. The other three men went down immediately, their bodies mauled by the .50-caliber, dead before they hit the ground.

“*Allahu akbar*,” Ahmed shouted, brave and doomed. He ran toward the American position, fire flashing from the muzzle of his AK. He was dead in seconds, as Wells had expected. Wells couldn’t help but admire the Americans’ skill.

Wells double-checked Ahmed and his men. They were silent and unmoving. He stood and crouched, careful to remain in the shadow of the boulder. For a moment he paused. He had known Hamid and Abdullah for years, broken bread with them, cursed the cold of these mountains with them.

He pulled out the Makarov he carried in a holster strapped to his hip. Pop. Pop. Pop. One shot into Hamid's head, one into Abdullah's. Quick and clean. They twitched and gurgled and were still. Wells closed his eyes. *I'm sorry*, he murmured through closed lips. But there was no other way. He hid himself behind the boulder and listened. Silence, but he knew the Americans had heard his shots and were looking his way. He would need to move now, or never.

"American," he yelled down the hill in English. "I'm American. Don't shoot. I'm friendly."

A burst of machine gun fire whistled close above his head.

"I'm American," he yelled again. "Don't shoot!"

"If you're American, stand up!" a voice yelled. "Where we can see you. Arms over your head."

Wells did as he was told, hoping they wouldn't cut him down out of fear or anger or just because they could. He could hear men walking up the slope toward him. Two searchlights popped on, blinding him. "Step forward, then lie prone, arms out."

Wells planted his face in the rocky dirt and kissed the earth. His plan had worked. He'd made contact.

BEHIND WELLS THE soldiers scuffled around. "What the hell?" someone said as they found Hamid and Abdullah. A spotlight illuminated the ground around Wells as a rifle muzzle pressed into his skull.

"Stay very still, Mr. American," the voice said, close now. "Who the fuck are you? And what happened to your friends back there?"

"I'm agency," Wells said. "My name's John Wells."

The muzzle jerked back. A sharp whistle. "Major," the voice above him said. A whispered conversation, then a new voice. "What did you say your name was?"

"John Wells."

The muzzle was back on his skull. "What's your EPI, Mr. Wells?" Emergency Proof of Identity. A short phrase unique to each field

agent, allowing him to prove his bona fides in situations like this. Normally not to be revealed to anyone outside the CIA. But Wells figured he'd make an exception, because they'd obviously been briefed that American agents might be operating behind the Taliban lines. And because of the rifle poking at his cranium.

"My EPI is Red Sox, Major." More seconds went by. Wells heard the soldier above him paging through papers.

"No shit," the voice said, friendlier now. A light southern accent. "So it is. I'm Glen Holmes. You can stand."

Wells did, and Holmes—a short, muscular man with a crew cut and a reddish-blond goatee—shook his hand. "I'd love to offer you a beer, Agent Wells, but they're back in Tajikistan."

"Call me John," Wells said, knowing Holmes wouldn't. Wells could see that the Special Forces didn't really trust him. They took his rifle and pistol and the knife strapped to his calf for "safekeeping." But they seemed to believe him when he told them how he had maneuvered his men into their ambush so that he could talk to them. In any case, they didn't hog-tie him or put a bag on his head to make him more cooperative.

So he told them what he had come to tell them, what he knew about the Qaeda camps, the training that the jihadis received, Qaeda's experiments with chemical weapons. "It was tenth-grade chemistry. Mix beaker A with beaker B and see what happens. Kill a couple dogs."

"What about bio? Nukes?"

"We didn't even have reliable electricity, Major. We—they—" As Wells switched pronouns, confusion overcame him. He was American, now and forever, and he would never betray his country. But after years in the camps he had grown to like some of the men in them. Like Ahmed, whom he had just helped kill. Wells shook his head. He would sort all this out later.

All the while Holmes watched him, saying nothing.

"They would have loved to get that stuff, biological weapons, nukes, but they didn't know how."

"Does it feel weird to speak so much English?" Holmes said suddenly.

"Not really," Wells said. "Yes. It does."

“You want to take a break?”

“I’m fine. Only . . .” Wells hesitated, not wanting to seem foolish. “Do you have any Gatorade? I really miss it.”

“Fitz, we have any Gatorade?”

They mixed him a packet of orange-flavored Gatorade in a water bottle and Wells guzzled it like a conquistador who’d found the fountain of youth. He told them what he knew about bin Laden’s inner circle, which was less than he would have liked, about the way Qaeda was financed, where he thought bin Laden had fled. The SF guys taped everything. He poured out information as fast as he could, clocking the hours as the moon moved across the sky. He wanted to get back by morning. The more confusion when he returned, the fewer questions he’d face about what had happened to his squad. Hundreds of Talibs and Arabs had died this night. Who would notice six more?

The sky began to lighten, and Wells knew he had to leave. “That’s it,” he said. “I wish I had more time. But I have to go back.”

“Back?” For a moment Holmes’s eyes widened. “Don’t you want an exfil?”

An exfiltration. Don’t you want to go home? Somehow Wells had forgotten even to consider the possibility. Probably because it seemed about as likely as going to the moon. Don’t you want a box seat at Fenway? A look at the ocean? Don’t you want to see a woman in a miniskirt? Don’t you want to leadfoot across Montana toward home? Don’t you want to kneel in front of your father’s grave and apologize for missing his funeral? Don’t you want to see Heather and Evan and your mom?

The answer to all those questions was yes. Home was life, his real life, and suddenly the pain of losing it hit him so hard that he closed his eyes and dipped his head in his hands.

“Wells?” Holmes said.

Then Wells remembered the glee that spread through the camps on September 11, the singing and boasting, the prayers to Allah. He had known something big was coming, but not the details. He should have tried to find out more, but he’d assumed Qaeda was aiming for an embassy somewhere, a Saudi oil pumping station. He hadn’t wanted to raise suspicions by asking too many questions.

Not the World Trade Center. It was so grand, so destructive. His imagination had failed, like everyone else's. And thousands of people had died.

Wells had made a promise to himself that day: This will never happen again, not as long as I'm alive to stop it. Nothing else mattered. Not that he had much else. Heather had remarried, and Evan probably had no idea who he was. Would he even know Evan? He hadn't seen a picture of his son in years. His real life, whatever that was, had vanished. What he'd done tonight proved that. Killing the men he commanded in cold blood.

How would his family recognize him when he couldn't recognize himself?

"No exfil," Wells said. "Can I have a pen and paper, Major?"

Holmes handed him a pad and a pen. Wells scribbled: "Will pursue UBL"—the agency's initials for Osama, which it called Usama. "No prior knowledge of 9/11. Still friendly. John."

He bit his lip and added one more line. "P.S.: Tell Heather and Evan and my mom I miss them."

He tore off the page, folded it, wrote "Exley" across the front. "Will you get this to Jennifer Exley at CIA? My case officer."

"Yes, sir."

"I'd rather you didn't read it." He handed the page to Holmes.

"Roger that." Holmes pulled out an envelope from another pocket and sealed the paper inside.

"Major, can I ask you something? What was it like?"

"What?"

"Two months ago. September eleventh."

"Nine-eleven?" Holmes shook his head, seemingly replaying the day in his head. "Like the whole country got smacked in the gut. People just sat home watching TV. Watching those towers fall, again and again. The jumpers, the second plane hitting. . . . It was unbelievable. I mean, I really couldn't believe it. If Tom Brokaw had come on and said, 'Hey, America, we were just fucking with you, ha ha,' I would have said, 'Well, okay.' That would have made more sense than what actually happened."

"These guys, they'll do anything." Wells knew it was a less than profound insight, but he was suddenly bone tired.

“My mother died two years ago,” Holmes said. “Cancer. Awful. That was the worst day of my life. This was second. And it was like that for everybody. Some of the Delta guys started driving up to New York, to dig people out, but I didn’t bother. I knew they’d want us at the base.”

Holmes looked at Wells. “You okay, John? Maybe Freddy should check you out.”

“Beat, that’s all,” Wells said. “I should go.” He stood and looked down at the plain. “That front line isn’t gonna hold much longer.”

“Your guys won’t last a week,” Holmes said.

“My guys.” Again Wells felt a strange vertigo.

“No offense.”

“No,” Wells said.

“Look,” Holmes said. “When you make it home, call me. I’m under my wife’s name—Debbie Turner. Siler City, North Carolina. I’ll take you fishing. Beautiful country.”

“Almost as nice as Montana.”

“When you get home, John.”

“Might be a while,” Wells said. He stood. Holmes gave him back his weapons. Wells strapped on the knife and pistol and slung the rifle over his shoulder. Holmes put out his hand and Wells clasped it in both of his.

“Major,” he said. “One more thing.”

“Yessir?”

“I need you to shoot me.”

Holmes took a step back, suddenly wary.

“In the arm. It won’t look right otherwise. I can’t come back in perfect shape and all my guys gone.”

“No chance,” Holmes said.

“Major. Then I’ll have to do it myself.”

“Christ.”

“A flesh wound. A through and through. No bone.”

Holmes hesitated, then nodded. “Okay. Turn around and start walking.”

“Start walking?”

“I’m Delta, Agent Wells.” Holmes used his best Carolina drawl:



“I can shoot the dick off a possum at one hundred paces. Which arm?”

“Better make it the left,” Wells said. He turned and walked away, slowly, holding his arm out. A few seconds later the shot came, burning through the skin and muscle of his left bicep as if a hot knitting needle had been jabbed into him. “*Cosumaq*,” Wells said, a nasty Arabic curse, as the blood splattered out. Your mother’s cunt. He sat down and looked at Holmes, who was still cradling his pistol. Just in case.

“Nice shot, Major.” It was true. The wound was clean and neat.

“Want another?”

Wells laughed, at first slowly, then harder, the breath coming out of him in short gasps as his blood pulsed down his arm. Holmes surely thought him crazy. But Wells couldn’t help himself. The Taliban didn’t make jokes like that.

“One’s fine,” he said, his laughter slowly subsiding.

“Want a bandage?”

“I better do it myself.” Wells ripped off a piece of his robe and tied a loose tourniquet around his arm, cutting the flow of blood to a trickle. The pain returned, burning intensely up his arm and into his shoulder. He’d felt worse. He’d live. He stood, feeling light-headed. He closed his eyes until the dizziness subsided.

“Siler City,” Holmes called out after him. “Don’t forget.”

Wells turned away and trudged south into the Afghan night.

### *Langley, Virginia*

EXLEY’S OFFICE WAS standard issue for a midgrade analyst. No windows, a wooden bookcase filled with histories of the Middle East and Afghanistan, two computers—one for a classified network, the other linked to the Internet—and a safe barely concealed behind a generic print of the English countryside. She did have a couple of pictures of her kids on her desk, and a cute birthday card from Randy, but the CIA discouraged its officers from showing too much individuality. The implicit lesson: here today, gone tomorrow.

Wells’s note took four days to reach her. She supposed the Special

Forces had more important things to do. In the interim, Kabul had fallen to the Northern Alliance. The Shamali battle had proved that the Talibs—like everyone else—could not stand up to American airpower. Now Exley sat at her desk, reading the cryptic note and the even more disturbing after-action report that had arrived with it. “Wells requested that Maj. Holmes shoot him in the arm so that he would appear to have engaged American forces . . .”

Exley squeezed the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes, but when she opened them nothing had changed. David and Jess would be asleep when she got home, and Randy would be watching television and very obviously not sulking, very obviously not asking how long he would have to put up with her late nights and weekends at work. Saving the world was hard on a marriage. Especially when the wife was doing the saving.

“He’s not coming back.”

She looked up to see Shafer, her boss, standing in her doorway. He enjoyed showing up unannounced in her office. One of his less attractive traits. Along with his uncertain grooming. He held up his own copy of Wells’s note.

“He’s not coming back,” Shafer said again. “He’s gone over. Or maybe he’s just loco. But I’ll bet you a fresh cup of coffee this is the last we hear from him. Too bad.” Shafer didn’t exactly look broken-hearted, Exley thought.

“I’m not so sure.”

“Reasons?”

“The postscript. ‘Tell Heather and Evan and my mom I miss them.’”

Shafer shrugged. “Last will and testament.”

“Then he’d say he loves them. He says he misses them. He wants to see them again. Maybe he’ll die over there, but he’s not trying to.”

“Hmm,” Shafer said. He turned and walked down the hall, yelling, “It’s almost ten. Go home, get some rest,” as he went.

“Tuck your shirt in,” she muttered. She looked at Wells’s note one more time before locking it inside her safe. She and Shafer and even Wells—they’d just have to wait, wouldn’t they? They’d all just have to wait.

PART ONE

**THE  
HOMECOMING  
KING**



# 1

## Present Day

### *North-West Frontier, on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan*

SHEIKH GUL SCOWLED at his congregation. “These days every Muslim must fight jihad,” he said in Pashtun, his voice rising. “When the Mongols invaded Baghdad, it didn’t help the people of Baghdad that they were pious Muslims. They died at the swords of the infidels.”

The sheikh threw his hands over his head.

“Now Islam is under siege again. Under siege in the land of the two mosques, and the land of the two rivers”—Saudi Arabia and Iraq. “Under siege here in Pakistan, where our leader works for Americans and Jews. Everywhere we are under siege,” said the sheikh, Mohammed Gul. He was a short, bearded man with a chunky body hidden under a smooth brown robe. His voice seemed to belong to someone much larger. Inside the mosque, a simple brick building whose walls were covered in flaking white paint, the worshippers murmured agreement and drew together. Brothers in arms. But their assent enraged the sheikh further.

“You say, ‘Yes, yes.’ But what do you do when prayers are finished? Do you sacrifice yourselves? You go home and do nothing. Muslims today love this world and hate death. We have abandoned jihad!” the sheikh shouted. He stopped to look out over the crowd

and wipe his brow. “And so Allah has subjugated us. Only when we sacrifice ourselves will we restore glory to Islam. On that day Allah will finally smile on us.”

Except it sounds like none of us will be around to see it, Wells thought. In the years that Wells had listened to Gul’s sermons, the sheikh had gotten angrier and angrier. The source of his fury was easy to understand. September 11 had faded, and Islam’s return to glory remained distant as ever. The Jews still ruled Israel. The Americans had installed a Shia government in Iraq, a country that had always been ruled by Sunnis. Yes, Shias were Muslim too. But Shia and Sunni Muslims had been at odds since the earliest days of Islam. To Osama and his fellow fundamentalist Sunnis—sometimes called Wahhabis—the Shia were little better than Jews.

Al Qaeda, “the Base” of the revolution, had never recovered from the loss of its own base in Afghanistan, Wells thought. When the Taliban fell, Qaeda’s troops fled east to the North-West Frontier, the mountainous border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Wells had narrowly escaped an American bomb at Tora Bora, the last big fight of the Afghan war. He liked to imagine that the bomb had been guided by Glen Holmes, who had swung it away from the hut where Wells hid.

But the United States hadn’t closed the noose at Tora Bora, for reasons Wells had never understood. Thousands of jihadis escaped. In 2002, they reached the mountains of the North-West Frontier, so named by the British, since the area was the northwest border of colonial India. The North-West Frontier was a wild land ruled by Pashtuns, devout Muslims who supported Qaeda’s brand of jihad, and was effectively closed to Pakistani and American soldiers. Even the Special Forces could operate there only for short stretches.

So Qaeda survived. But it did not thrive. Osama and his lieutenants scurried between holes, occasionally releasing tapes to rouse the faithful. Every few months the group launched an attack. It had blasted a train station in Madrid, blown up hotels in Egypt and subways in London, attacked oil workers in Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, it fought the American occupiers. But nothing that had shaken the world like September 11.

Meanwhile Wells and his fellow jihadis eked out a miserable ex-

istence. In theory, Qaeda's paymasters had arranged for Pashtun villagers to house them. In reality, they were a burden on desperately poor families. They had to earn their keep like everyone else. Wells and the half dozen Arabs living in this village, just outside Akora Khatak, survived on stale bread and scraps of lamb. Wells did not want to guess how much weight he had lost. He had hardly recognized himself the few times he had seen himself in a mirror. The bullet hole in his left arm had turned into a knot of scar tissue that ached unpredictably.

The winters were especially difficult, even for Wells, who had grown up playing in the Bitterroot Range on the Montana-Idaho border. The cold sank into his bones. He could only imagine what the Saudis thought. Lots of them had been martyred in these mountains, but not from bombs or bullets. They'd died of pneumonia and altitude sickness and something that looked a lot like scurvy. They'd died asking for their mothers, and a few had died cursing Osama and the awful place he'd led them. Wells ate fresh fruit whenever he could, which wasn't often, and marveled at the toughness of the Pashtuns.

To keep sane he practiced his soldiering as much as possible. The local tribal leader had helped him set up a small firing range on flat ground a few miles outside the village. Every few weeks Wells rode out with a half dozen men and shot off as many rounds as he could spare. But he couldn't pretend he was doing anything more than passing time. They all were. If America vs. Qaeda were a Pop Warner football game, the refs would have invoked the mercy rule and ended it a long time ago.

Gul stepped into the crowd of worshippers. He looked at the men around him and spoke again, his voice low and intense. "The time for speeches is done, brothers," he said. "Allah willing, we will see action soon. May Allah bless all faithful Muslims. Amen."

The men clustered close to hug the sheikh. Waiting his turn, Wells wondered if Gul knew something or was just trying to rally the congregation. He poked with his tongue at a loose molar in the back of his mouth, sending a spurt of pain through his jaw. Dental care in the North-West Frontier left something to be desired. In a few weeks he would have to visit the medical clinic in Akora to have the tooth

“examined.” Or maybe he’d just find a pair of pliers and do the job himself.

Lately Wells had dreamed of leaving this place. He could hitch a ride to Peshawar, catch a bus to Islamabad, and knock on the front gate of the American embassy. Or, more accurately, knock on the roadblocks that kept a truck bomb from getting too close to the embassy’s blastproof walls. A few minutes and he’d be inside. A couple days and he’d be home. No one would say he had failed. Not to his face, anyway. They’d say he had done all he could, all anyone could. But somewhere inside he would know better. And he would never forgive himself.

Because this wasn’t Pop Warner football. The mercy rule didn’t exist. The men standing beside him in this mosque would happily give their lives to be remembered as martyrs. They were stuck in these mountains, but their goal remained unchanged. To punish the crusaders for their hubris. To take back Jerusalem. To kill Americans. Qaeda’s desire to destroy was limited only by its resources. For now the group was weak, but that could change instantly. If Qaeda’s assassins succeeded in killing Pakistan’s president, the country might suddenly have a Wahhabi in charge. Then bin Laden would have a nuclear weapon to play with. An Islamic bomb. And sooner or later there would be a big hole in New York or London or Washington.

Anyway, living here had a few compensations. Wells had learned the Koran better than he ever expected. He had a sense of how monks had lived in the Middle Ages, copying Bibles by hand. He knew now how one book could become moral and spiritual guidance and entertainment all at once.

After so many years in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Wells found that his belief in Islam—once just a cover story—had turned real. The faith touched him in a way that Christianity never had. Wells had always been skeptical of religion. When he read the Koran at night on his bed alone he suffered the same doubts about its promises of paradise as he did when he read the apostles’ description of Christ rising from the dead. Yet he loved the Koran’s exhortations that men should treat one another as brothers and give all they could to charity. The *umma*, the brotherhood, was real. He could walk into any house in this village and be offered a cup of hot



sweet tea and a meal by a family that could barely feed its own children. And no one needed a priest's help to reach the divine in Islam; anyone who studied hard and was humble could seek enlightenment for himself.

But Islam's biggest strength was its greatest weakness, Wells thought. The religion's flexibility had made it a cloak for the anger of men tired of being ruled by America and the West. Islam was the Marxism of the twenty-first century, a cover for national liberation movements of all stripes. Except that the high priests of Marxism had never promised their followers rewards in the next world in exchange for their deaths in this one. Wahhabis like bin Laden had married their fury at the United States with a particularly nasty vision of Islam. They wanted to take the religion back to the seventh-century desert. They couldn't compete in the modern world, so they would pretend that it didn't exist. Or destroy it. Their anger resonated with hundreds of millions of desperately poor Muslims. But in Wells's eyes they had perverted the religion they claimed to represent. Islam wasn't incompatible with progress. In fact, Islamic nations had once been among the world's most advanced. Eight hundred years ago, as Christians burned witches, the Muslim Abbasids had built a university in Baghdad that held eighty thousand books. Then the Mongols had come. Things had gone downhill ever since.

Wells kept his views to himself. Publicly, he spent hours each day studying the Koran with Sheikh Gul and the clerics at the village madrassa. His Qaeda superiors had taken notice. And that was the other reason Wells stayed in the North-West Frontier. He believed that he had at last convinced Qaeda's leadership of his loyalty; the other jihadis in the village had begun to listen to him more carefully. Or so he hoped.

Wells's turn to greet Sheikh Gul had come. Wells patted his heart, a traditional sign of affection. "*Allahu akbar*," he said.

"*Allahu akbar*," said the sheikh. "Will you come to the mosque tomorrow morning to study, Jalal?"

"I would be honored," Wells said.

"*Salaam alaikum*." Peace be with you.

"*Alaikum salaam*."

. . .

WELLS WALKED OUT of the mosque into the village's dusty main street. As he blinked in the weak spring sunlight, two bearded men walked toward him. Wells knew them vaguely, though not their names. They lived in the mountains, second-tier bodyguards for Osama.

"*Salaam alaikum*, Jalal," they said.

"*Alaikum salaam*."

The men tapped their chests in greeting.

"I am Shihab," the shorter one said.

"Bassim." The taller of the two, though Wells towered over him. His shoes were leather and his white robe clean; maybe life in the mountains had improved. Or maybe Osama was living in a village now.

"*Allahu akbar*," Wells said.

"*Allahu akbar*."

"The *mujaddid* asks that you come with us," Bassim said. *Mujaddid*. The renewer, a man sent by Allah to lead Islam's renaissance. Bin Laden was the *mujaddid*.

"Of course." A battered Toyota Crown sedan was parked behind the men. It was the only car in the village that Wells didn't recognize, so it must be theirs. He stepped toward it. Bassim steered him away.

"He asks that you pack a bag. With everything you own that you wish to keep."

The request was unexpected, but Wells merely nodded. "Shouldn't take long," he said. They walked down an alley to the brick hut where Wells lived with three other jihadis.

Inside, Naji, a young Jordanian who had become Wells's best friend in the mountains, thumbed through a tattered magazine whose cover featured Imran Khan, a famous Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician. In the corner a coffeepot boiled on a little steel stove.

"Jalal," Naji said, "have you found us any sponsors yet?" For months, Naji and Wells had joked to each other about starting a cricket team for Qaeda, maybe getting corporate sponsorship: "The Jihadis will blow you away." Wells wouldn't have made those jokes

to anyone else. But Naji was more sophisticated than most jihadis. He had grown up in Amman, Jordan's capital, paradise compared to this village. And Wells had saved Naji's life the previous summer, stitching the Jordanian up after Afghan police shot him at a border checkpoint. Since then the two men had been able to talk openly about the frustrations of living in the North-West Frontier.

"Soon," Wells said.

Hamra, Wells's cat, rubbed against his leg and jumped on the thin gray blanket that covered his narrow cot. She was a stray Wells had found two years before, skinny, red—which explained her name; *hamra* means "red" in Arabic—and a great leaper. She had chosen him. One winter morning she had followed him around the village, mewling pathetically, refusing to go away even when he shouted at her. He couldn't bear watching her starve, so despite warnings from his fellow villagers that one cat would soon turn into ten, he'd taken her in.

"Hello, Hamra," he said, petting her quickly as Bassim walked into the hut. Shihab followed, murmuring something to Bassim that Wells couldn't hear.

"Bassim and Shihab—Naji," Wells said.

"*Marhaba*," Naji said. Hello. Shihab and Bassim ignored him.

"Please, have coffee," Wells said.

"We must leave soon," Bassim said.

"Naji," Wells said. "Can you leave us for a moment?"

Naji looked at Bassim and Shihab. "Are you sure?"

"*Nam.*"

As Naji walked out, Wells stopped him. "Naji," Wells said. He ran his fingers over Hamra's head. "Take care of her while I'm gone."

"When will you be back, Jalal?"

Wells merely shook his head.

"*Hamdulillah*, then," Naji said. Praise be to God, a traditional Arabic blessing. "*Masalaama.*" Good-bye.

"*Hamdulillah.*" They hugged, briefly, and Naji walked out.

BASSIM AND SHIHAB looked on as Wells grabbed a canvas bag from under his cot. He threw in the few ragged clothes he wanted:

his spare robe, a pair of beaten sneakers, a faded green wool sweater, its threads loose. A world-band radio he'd bought in Akora Khatak a year before, and a couple of spare batteries. The twelve thousand rupees—about two hundred dollars—he had saved. He didn't have much else. No photographs, no television, no books except the Koran and a couple of Islamic philosophy texts. He slipped those gently into the bag. And his guns, of course. He lay on the dirt floor and pulled his AK and his Makarov from under the bed.

"Those you can leave, Jalal," Bassim said.

Wells could not remember the last time he had slept without a rifle. He would rather have left his clothes. "I'd rather not."

"You won't need them where you're going."

Wells decided not to argue. Not that he had much choice. In any case, he always had his knife. He slid the guns back under the bed.

"The dagger as well," Bassim said. "It will be safer for all of us."

Without a word, Wells lifted his robe, unstrapped his knife from his leg and tossed it on the bed. He looked around the room, trying to remember what else he might want. He had no computer or camera or cell phone. His cherished night-vision goggles had broken during the bombing at Tora Bora.

He had held on to a piece of shrapnel from that battle, shrapnel that had gashed a hole in a wall inches above his head. But he had no desire to take it with him. Had his life narrowed to this? Yes. Wells supposed that was why he didn't fear what would happen next. He zipped his bag. "Good-bye, Hamra," he said, stroking her thin fur. She arched her back, jumped off the bed, and strolled out of the hut without a second glance. So much for animal intuition, Wells thought.

"That's all?" Bassim said.

"My good china's in the other hut." Immediately he wished he hadn't made the joke, for Bassim looked blankly at him.

"Good china?"

"Let's go."

AT THE CAR Shihab opened the front passenger door and waved Wells inside. "*Shukran jazeelan*," Wells said. Thanks very much. Shihab said nothing, just shut the door and climbed in the back.

Bassim slid into the driver's seat, and they rolled off. Wells wondered if he was being taken to bin Laden again—though if he was, they were using very different tactics this time.

He had met Osama twice before, in visits that left him no chance to carry out his vow to kill Qaeda's maximum leader. The first came just before the United States invaded Iraq. Wells had been picked up outside Akora Khatak, blindfolded, and driven for hours over pot-holed roads. Then he was transferred to a horse-drawn cart and shuffled over rock paths for hours more. When the ride finished, he was stripped to his tattered T-shirt and shorts and searched. His blindfold was removed and he was led up a mountain path that ended at a stone cave.

Inside, a small generator provided light and three prayer rugs decoration. A half-eaten plate of lamb and rice sat on a rough wooden table; bin Laden sat behind it, flanked by bodyguards slinging AKs. The sheikh looked gaunt and weak, his long beard grayish white. Wells knelt, and bin Laden had asked whether he believed the United States would go to war with Iraq.

"Yes, Sheikh," he'd said.

"Even if the rest of the world does not agree?"

"The crusaders are anxious for this war."

"And will they win?"

"You saw what their bombs can do. They will be in Baghdad before summer."

"So it would be foolish for us to send soldiers?"

Wells reminded himself not to be too negative. "We cannot stop them from destroying Saddam. But afterward, when they have taken over, they will be more vulnerable. *Inshallah*, we can hit them every day, small attacks, grinding them down." At this Wells felt a pang of guilt, wondering how many American soldiers would die in the kind of war he had proposed. But bin Laden would surely have reached that conclusion anyway. Guerrilla wars were the only way to fight the U.S. Army.

Bin Laden stroked his beard, looked away, looked back at Wells with cunning narrow eyes. Finally he smiled. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Thank you, Jalal." And with that the sheikh waved him out.

. . .

TWO YEARS LATER Wells had been taken to a different cave for another meeting, where bin Laden had asked him about the Hoover Dam. “Is it a great symbol of America?” he had said. Wells had answered honestly. Most Americans had no idea what or where the Hoover Dam was.

“Are you sure, Jalal?” bin Laden said. He sounded disappointed.

Wells looked at the guards flanking bin Laden and wished for a gun or a knife tipped with rat poison. Even a chip in his shoulder so a B-2 could drop a bomb on this stinking hole. “Yes, *Mujaddid*,” he said.

Bin Laden nodded. “*Shukran*,” he said, and the guards escorted Wells out. He did not know how much credit he deserved for the fact that the Hoover Dam was still in one piece.

NOW, AS HE sat in the Toyota, Wells wasn’t sure what to think. If they had wanted to kill him they could have taken him into the mountains, or even shot him while he slept. The Pakistani cops wouldn’t exactly launch an all-out investigation. The police hardly came into the North-West Frontier without Pakistani Army escorts.

But they weren’t going into the mountains. They were heading toward Peshawar. Wells figured that increased his chances of survival. As long as they didn’t get hit by a bus. The roads in Pakistan were a constant game of chicken, and Bassim drove as though he wanted to catch afternoon tea with Allah. Wells’s head snapped back as Bassim swerved into oncoming traffic to pass a truck stuffed with cheap wooden furniture. As an oncoming gasoline tanker blasted its horn, Bassim cut in front of the furniture truck and back into his own lane, nearly sliding off the road and into a ravine.

“Easy, Bassim,” Wells said. Bassim turned to stare at him, ignoring the road. The Toyota accelerated again, closing in on a tractor dragging a cartload of propane cylinders.

“You don’t like how I drive? You want to drive?”

Jesus Christ, Wells thought—a mental tic he supposed he would never lose. The whole Muslim world suffered from a massive testosterone overdose, and the jihadis were the worst. “Of course not,” Wells said, careful to keep a straight face. If he as much as smiled

Bassim really would take them into the ditch, just to prove he could. “You drive great.”

A long honk pulled Bassim’s attention back to the road. They were about to slam into the back of the propane cart. Bassim stamped on the brakes and the Toyota skidded to a stop by the side of the road. “See,” Bassim said. “There is nothing wrong with my driving. My reflexes are superb.”

“*Nam*,” Wells said.

“My father was a famous driver. I learned from him.”

“Your father,” the otherwise silent Shihab said from the back seat, “died in a car accident.”

Bassim turned to glare at Shihab as Wells bit his lip to stifle his laughter. Finally Bassim tapped the gas and they lurched back into traffic. No one said anything the rest of the trip.

TWO HOURS LATER the Toyota rolled into Peshawar, the biggest city in the North-West Frontier, a million-person jumble of crumbling concrete buildings and brick huts. Bassim nosed the sedan through a slum clogged with donkey carts hauling propane tanks and garbage. The roads became so crowded that the car could go no farther. In front of a tiny shop whose windows were filled with dusty tins of condensed milk, Bassim killed the engine. Shihab hopped out and opened Wells’s door.

“Come,” he said, tugging Wells down the street. The rich heavy stench of sewage and mud filled the air. Wells stepped through piles of rotten fruit and donkey shit. Children ran around them, kicking cans and a torn sphere that had once been a soccer ball. So many children. They were everywhere in Pakistan. They sat on the streets, selling toys and overripe bananas, eyes shining with hunger. In neighborhoods like this one they surrounded anyone standing still, their hands out, smiling and asking for “rupees, rupees.” The lucky ones found their way to the madrassas, Islamic schools that educated them well in the Koran and badly in everything else. What would they do when they grew up, if not join the jihad?

Bassim pushed open the rusting steel door of an apartment building and pulled Wells inside. “Third floor.” He and Shihab seemed

desperate to get off the street. Wells wondered whether bin Laden would really risk living here.

The stairwell was dark and smelled of piss and onions. When they reached the third floor, Bassim tugged Wells toward the back of the building. He knocked twice on a steel door, then paused and knocked twice again.

“*Nam?*” a voice said from inside.

Bassim said nothing but knocked twice more. The door swung open. A man in a turban waved them in with his AK.

The room was dark and dreary, lit by a trickle of fading daylight that leaked through the dirty window high on the back wall. Beneath the window, a small poster of bin Laden had been pinned up carefully.

“Sit,” the guard said, pointing to a bench covered with tattered red cushions. Wells took a closer look around. Behind a blue beaded curtain, a narrow corridor led to the back of the apartment. In a corner, water boiled on a stove beside scissors, a razor, and a blue plastic mirror. The only other furniture was a wooden chair that had been placed atop a bunch of newspapers.

The minutes ticked by. No one said a word. Wells had never seen Arab men quiet for this long. He wondered if they really planned to shoot him in here. So be it. He had done his best. Nonetheless, he looked around, half-consciously plotting escape routes. That boiling water would come in handy.

Wells heard the shuffle of footsteps in the corridor. “Stand,” the guard said quickly, gesturing with his rifle. As they jumped up, the curtain parted and four men walked in, led by a heavy man wearing square steel glasses. Ayman al-Zawahiri. Wells understood why his minders had been so nervous. Zawahiri was bin Laden’s deputy, a man almost more important to Qaeda than the sheikh himself. He knew the details of the group’s operations, its financing, where its men were hidden. Bin Laden set broad strategy and spoke for the organization, but without Zawahiri Qaeda could not function. Zawahiri hugged Shihab and Bassim and nodded to Wells.

“*Salaam alaikum*, Jalal.”

“*Salaam alaikum*, Mujahid.”

“*Allahu akbar*.”



“*Allahu akbar.*”

“We have much to talk about. But first you must shave.” Zawahiri pointed at the pot of water.

“Shave?” Wells was proud of his thick, bushy beard, which he had not trimmed since coming to the North-West Frontier. Every Qaeda member wanted “a beard the length of a fist,” which fat-was—religious edicts—had decreed the minimum acceptable length. Wells’s was even longer.

“The Prophet would not approve,” Wells said.

“In this case he would.” Behind the glasses, Zawahiri’s eyes were flat.

Wells decided not to argue. “To the skin?”

“*Nam,*” Zawahiri said. “To the skin.”

So while the other men watched, Wells clipped his long brown beard with the scissors, leaving tufts of curly hair on the counter by the stove.

He looked in the mirror. In place of his beard, a pathetic coat of peach fuzz covered his face. Already he hardly recognized himself. He dipped the razor—a plastic single-blade—in the pot and scraped it over his skin. He had to admit he enjoyed the sensation of shaving, the heat of the blade on his face. He took his time, using short smooth strokes, tapping the razor against the pot to shake out the stubble. Finally he was done. Again he looked in the mirror.

“Very handsome, Jalal,” Zawahiri said. He seemed amused.

Wells rubbed his newly smooth face. “It feels strange,” he said. More than strange. He felt young and soft without the beard. Vulnerable.

“Sit,” Zawahiri said, pointing at the chair with the newspapers beneath it. “I will cut your hair.” Wells sat silently as Qaeda’s No. 2 went to work. He tried to remember the last time someone else had cut his hair; in Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier he had done the job himself. In Washington, maybe, the night before he had left the United States to join the camps.

The night he had stayed at his apartment instead of meeting Exley for a drink after work. Just a drink, say good-bye before I go, he’d said, and they’d both known he was lying and had laughed to cover their nervousness. Yes, he thought. Had to be that night. He had

gotten the haircut for her. But then he hadn't shown up. He'd been ashamed, embarrassed, for his wife and for Exley's husband. He'd driven home after the haircut, hadn't called to cancel, and the next morning he had left on a trip that hadn't stopped yet. He had forgotten that night, or shoved it into a corner of his mind where he put all the things that didn't help him survive over here. Now the memories came flooding back. Exley. Was her hair still short? Did she still have that long blue dress?

He'd been gone a long time.

ZAWAHIRI TAPPED HIS shoulder. Wells looked down to see clumps of his curly brown hair scattered over the newspaper. "Now you don't look so Arab. Good," Zawahiri said. He handed the mirror to Wells. A little ragged, but surprisingly decent.

"Stand here," Zawahiri said, pointing to the beaded blue curtain. "Waleed, take Jalal's picture." One of the men who'd come in with Zawahiri held up a portable passport camera. Wells wondered whether they were taking a death shot, to be FedExed to Langley along with a dozen black roses.

"Look at the light," Waleed said. Click. Click. Click. "*Shukran.*" He walked down the corridor.

"Sit," Zawahiri said to Wells, tapping the bench beside him. "Jalal, what would you do if the sheikh said your time for martyrdom had come?"

Wells looked around the room, readying himself. Only one gun out, though the others were surely armed. He might have a chance. Yet he thought trying to escape would be a mistake. Zawahiri's manner seemed professorial, as if he were genuinely interested in Wells's answer. They wouldn't have brought him all this way just to kill him; they could have done that easily in the mountains, and Zawahiri wouldn't have bothered to come.

"If Allah wishes martyrdom for me, then so be it," Wells said.

"Even if you did not know why?"

"We cannot always understand the ways of the Almighty."

"Yes," Zawahiri said. "Very good." He stood. "Jalal—John—you are American."

"Once I was American," Wells said. "I serve Allah now."

“You served in the American army. You jumped from airplanes.”

Don’t argue, Wells told himself. He’s testing you. “My past is no secret, Mujahid. They taught me to fight. But they follow a false prophet. I accepted the true faith.”

Zawahiri glanced at the man sitting in the corner, a handsome Pakistani with neatly trimmed black hair and a small mustache.

“You have fought with us for many years. You study the Koran. You do not fear martyrdom. You seem calm even now.” Zawahiri took the AK from the guard. Almost idly, he flicked down the safety, setting the rifle on full automatic. He pointed the gun at Wells.

“Every man fears martyrdom. Those who say they don’t are lying,” Wells said, remembering the men he had seen die. If he was wrong about all of this, he hoped Zawahiri could shoot straight, at least. Make it quick.

“So you are afraid?” Zawahiri said. He pulled back the rifle’s slide, chambering a round.

Wells stayed utterly still. Either way he wouldn’t have long to wait now. “I trust in Allah and I trust in the Prophet,” he said.

“See?” Zawahiri said to the mustached man. He again pulled back the slide on the rifle, popping the round out of the chamber. He clicked up the rifle’s safety and handed it back to the guard.

“If you trust in the Prophet, then I trust you,” he said. “And I have a mission for you. An important mission.” Zawahiri motioned to a fat man who had sat silently in the corner during the meeting. “This is Farouk Khan. Allah willing, he will have a task for you.”

“*Salaam alaikum.*”

“*Alaikum salaam.*”

Then Zawahiri pointed to the mustached man. “And this is Omar Khadri,” he said. “You will see him again. In America.”

Khadri wore Western clothes, a button-down shirt and jeans. “Hello, Jalal,” he said. In English. *English* English. He sounded like he’d come straight from Oxford. Khadri put out a hand, and Wells shook it—a very Western greeting. Arab men usually hugged.

“They’re ready,” Waleed said from the corridor.

“Bring them,” Zawahiri said.

Waleed walked back into the room and handed two passports to Zawahiri.

“Very good,” Zawahiri said, and handed the passports to Wells: one Italian and one British, both featuring the pictures of Wells taken a few minutes before, and both good enough to fool even an experienced immigration agent.

“Today is Friday,” Zawahiri said. “On Tuesday there is a Pakistan Airlines flight to Hong Kong. A friend in the ISI”—the Inter-Service Intelligence, the powerful Pakistani secret police agency—“will put you on it. Use the Italian passport for Hong Kong customs. Wait a week, then fly to Frankfurt. From there you should have no problems getting into the United States with the British passport.”

“Your skin is the right color, after all,” Khadri said. He laughed, a nasty little laugh that scratched at Wells. He would have been glad to watch me die, Wells thought.

“And then, Mujahid?” he said to Zawahiri.

Zawahiri pulled out a brick of hundred-dollar bills and a torn playing card from his robe. He handed Wells the bills, held together with a fraying rubber band. “Five thousand dollars. To get to New York.” He held up the card, half of the king of spades.

“There’s a deli in Queens,” Khadri said. “Give them this. They’ll give you thirty-five thousand dollars.”

*Hawala*, Wells thought. The bane of American efforts to clamp down on Qaeda’s finances. The informal banking system of the Middle East, used by traders for centuries to move money. The other half of the card had been mailed from Pakistan to Queens, or maybe brought over by hand. The two halves functioned as a unique code, a thirty-five-thousand-dollar withdrawal waiting to be made. Eventually the accounts would be evened up; Zawahiri would funnel thirty-five grand in gold bars—plus a fee—to the deli owner’s brother in Islamabad, or diamonds to a cousin in Abu Dhabi. The owner might be a jihadi, or just a man who knew how to walk money around the world without leaving footprints.

Zawahiri handed the card to Wells. He looked at it—an ordinary red-backed playing card—then tucked it into the brick of bills. “I’ll do my best not to lose it,” he said. “How will I know the deli?”

“We’ve set up an e-mail account for you—SmoothJohnny1234@gmail.com,” Omar said. “All one word.”

“Smooth Johnny?” Wells said. “I’m not so sure about that, Omar.” He laughed as naturally as he could. Best to get on the guy’s good side. “And then?”

“Then you move to Atlanta,” Zawahiri said.

“And wait. It may be a few months. Practice your shooting,” Khadri said. “Get a job. Keep out of the mosques. Blend in. It shouldn’t be hard.”

“Can’t you tell me more?”

Khadri shook his head. “In time, Jalal.”

“Good luck,” Zawahiri said.

Wells hoped his face didn’t betray his fury. They had shoved him to the edge of a thousand-foot drop, made him see his own death. And he had passed their test. So he was alive, with five grand in his pocket and a ride to Hong Kong. But they still didn’t trust him enough to tell him what they had planned.

Fine, Wells thought. In time. He tapped his chest. “I won’t fail you, Mujahid,” he said. “*Salaam alaikum.*”

“*Alaikum salaam.*”

Zawahiri and Khadri stood to leave. At the door, Khadri turned and looked at Wells. “*Alaikum salaam*, John. How does it feel to be going home?”

“Home?” Wells said. “I wish I knew.”