



INCHEON, SOUTH KOREA

TED BECK WALKED WEST DOWN THE ROTTING PIER, squinting through his wrap-around sunglasses into the late-afternoon haze. He was alone, and he moved without haste. He'd arrived early, and the boat he'd come to meet was nowhere in sight.

Finally he reached the end of the dock. Trash from three countries—China and the two Koreas—bobbed in the dank water, the eastern edge of the Yellow Sea. The air was heavy with smoke from the ships that docked at Incheon every day to load up on cars and televisions for the United States. The sun had baked the fumes into a brown smog that burned Beck's throat and made him want a cigarette.

He fished a packet of Camel Lights from his pocket and lit up. He'd tried to quit over the years. But if he was going to sign up for missions like this one, what was the point? He smoked slowly and when he was done flicked the butt away. It spun into the harbor, joining the empty beer cans and condom wrappers.

Then he heard the low rumble of a boat engine.

Incheon was an industrial port fifty miles west of Seoul and a few miles south of the Demilitarized Zone, the strip that separated North and South

4 ALEX BERENSON

Korea. During the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur had landed here, cutting behind North Korean lines to stop the Communist advance.

A statue of him stood atop a hill not far from this pier. Binoculars in hand, the general looked out to the Yellow Sea, which separated China and the Korean Peninsula. This afternoon, Beck would head into those waters, on a mission smaller than MacArthur's assault but just as dangerous.

The rumble of the distant boat grew louder. Beck pulled his wallet out of his pocket, a battered piece of cowhide that had seen him through thirty-two countries and three counterinsurgencies. He wasn't carrying any identification or a passport, just money. About \$3,000 in all. And three pictures: his wife and their two sons. He took out the pictures and kissed them.

Then he flicked his lighter to them and watched them burn, holding them as long as he could, until the flames singed his fingers and he had to let them go. Their remnants sank into the water and drifted away.

Beck carried out the same ritual before every mission. More important, burning the pictures was his way of accepting the danger of the mission. When he came back, he'd put fresh copies in his wallet. Until the next time.

THE MESSAGE HAD COME in twelve days before, to a signals-intelligence station at Camp Bonifas, on the edge of the Demilitarized Zone. The six hundred Americans and South Koreans who lived at Bonifas stayed on alert twenty-four hours a day, knowing they would be the world's tripwire if the North Korean army came over the DMZ. As they waited, they monitored the North's airwaves, listening for messages from American spies across the border.

To the officers at the Bonifas station, the transmission was gibberish, a twenty-two-second series of 1s and 0s. But they knew it meant something, for it came in on a shortwave frequency reserved for the highest-priority messages. They forwarded it across the world to Fort Meade, Maryland, the headquarters of the National Security Agency. From Fort Meade, the message, now decoded, took a shorter trip, across the Potomac to a seventh-floor office at CIA headquarters.

There it caused Vinny Duto, the director of the CIA, to unleash a few uncoded curses of his own. For the message was short, simple—and unwelcome. The Drafter wanted out of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the country-sized prison commonly called North Korea. Immediately if not sooner.

The Drafter’s real name was Sung Kwan. Dr. Sung Kwan. He was a scientist in North Korea’s nuclear program, and by far the most important asset the United States had in North Korea. “Asset” was a rather clinical way to describe Sung, who was after all a person, not a spy satellite or a well-placed bug. But the term was fitting. For Sung had told the United States exactly where the North Koreans held their nuclear weapons—information that was priceless.

Most analysts outside the CIA thought that North Korea hid its nukes in caves, hoping to keep them safe from an American airstrike. They were wrong. In fact, the nukes were kept in a warehouse in Pyongyang, North Korea’s capital. The Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il, wanted them close by, protected by the same army regiment that provided his personal security.

Now the USS *Lake Champlain*, a guided missile cruiser in the Sea of Japan, had a dozen Tomahawk missiles targeted on the building. If the order came, the Tomahawks could turn the warehouse into rubble in minutes. All thanks to Sung. And now he wanted an emergency exfiltration. No wonder Vinny Duto was upset.

SUNG WAS A CAREFUL SPY. He had met American agents only three times, each time in Pakistan, outside the Orwellian gaze of the North Korean secret police. But now something had gone wrong. In his message, Sung said he was concerned for his safety and believed he needed to get out of North Korea. He didn’t explain more.

At Langley, the officers on the North Korea desk struggled to make sense of Sung’s message. How did he know he was about to be taken in? Had he been interrogated? Or had he been arrested already, strung up and left to rot? In that case, the pickup request was nothing more than bait, an SOS from a man who had already drowned, meant to lure would-be rescuers into an ambush.

The CIA responded to Sung with its own shortwave broadcasts, asking him for more detail. But as the days ticked by, the listening station at Bonifas remained quiet.

Finally Duto decided that the agency had to send in a team. Without proof that the message was a trap, Langley couldn't ignore Sung's plea. The agency always promised its moles to respond if they asked for help. The vow was both a moral obligation and a recruiting tool. Moles needed to believe that their agency handlers shared the risks they took.

Three men were going in. Beck, the leader, was a former Navy Seal, now a senior officer in the agency's Special Operations Group. He was accompanied by Seth Kang, a Korean-American operative who'd infiltrated North Korea before, and Choe Gu, a lieutenant in the South Korean navy. All knew the risks of this mission. But they couldn't say no, not once they understood the stakes.

THE PHANTOM LOOKED FAST even when it wasn't moving. The boat was matte black, narrow and long, with an arrow-shaped hull that came to a razor-sharp tip. It was a cigarette boat, the kind favored by drug runners for quick trips in calm seas. But in place of an open deck, like most cigarette boats, the Phantom had a cabin cover its cockpit, topped by a small forest of microwave dishes. Its windows were two-inch-thick bullet-resistant glass. For extra range the Phantom carried three gas tanks that held six hundred gallons in all. For extra protection its hull was coated with Kevlar. And for extra speed it had twin Mercury engines that threw out 650 horsepower apiece. At full throttle, it ran at seventy knots.

Langley had given Beck *carte blanche* to decide how to pull off Sung's extraction. A helicopter was out. The North Koreans operated radar stations every few miles on the coast. Beck had considered using a fishing trawler before deciding on the Phantom. The boat was practically invisible on radar, and surprisingly quiet, thanks to the oversized mufflers on the Mercurys. Plus, if the North Koreans were waiting for them, a speedboat would give them a chance of getting away.

The Phantom was based in Miami, where the CIA and Drug Enforcement Agency used it to chase drug traffickers around the Caribbean. Three days before, the agency had chartered a cargo jet and flown in the boat, landing it at Osan Air Base outside Seoul to avoid pesky Korean customs agents.

Beck and his men had spent two nights jetting around the Yellow Sea to learn the Phantom's quirks. The boat seemed to want to fly. Jam the throttles and its nose lifted from the water as the engines opened up.

Beck hoped that tonight they wouldn't have to take it anywhere near its limits.

RIGHT ON TIME, 5:00 P.M., the Phantom curled up to the dock. Beck hopped on and stepped into the pilothouse, feeling the slight sway of the boat beneath his feet. Inside the air was crisp, and the tinted windows provided relief from the sun. Beck slipped his sunglasses into his jacket pocket. As he did, his fingers brushed across the plastic bag he had picked up that morning from the chief of Seoul station.

Before they left this dock he would have to tell Choe and Kang about what he was carrying in the bag. They deserved to know. They deserved the choice.

Kang sat in the navigator's chair, scrolling through satellite photographs of Point D, the pickup site. North of the DMZ, the Korean Peninsula widened, jutting west into the Yellow Sea toward China. Point D was located on a sliver of land a hundred miles northwest of Incheon. The satellite photos showed unbroken forests on the hills around the inlet. Haeju, the nearest city of any size, was fifty miles east.

Beck and his men would arrive at the landing spot at 2330 and wait thirty minutes. If Sung didn't show, they would assume he had changed his mind—or been killed—and wait for a new message.

"Simple enough," Kang had said two days before, when Beck explained. "What could go wrong?"

Beck hardly needed to answer. For starters, North Korea claimed control of the Yellow Sea well past the twelve-mile limit of international law. The

North Korean navy had been known to fire on fishing trawlers unlucky enough to cross their path. The Phantom would have to dodge them. Then there were the shore artillery batteries along the coast. And the minefields, some new, others left over from the Korean War.

Not to mention the possibility that the North Koreans already had arrested Sung and set them up. With the help of the NSA, Langley had done what it could to make sure that the Phantom wasn't heading into an ambush. For the last week, spy satellites had watched the waters around the pickup spot, looking for overflights by the North Korean air force or unusual activity by the navy. So far the satellites hadn't picked anything up.

Meanwhile, Chinook rescue helicopters and F-16 jets were on standby at Osan and the Navy had moved the USS *Decatur*, a destroyer, into the Yellow Sea.

But the helicopters had strict orders against violating North Korean territory. Pyongyang would view an American incursion into its airspace as an act of war. And now that the North had nuclear weapons, Washington couldn't antagonize it needlessly.

But the Phantom was expendable. It didn't carry American markings, or any markings at all. If North Korea captured it, the United States and South Korea would disavow knowledge of its existence. Beck and his men would have to be well outside the twelve-mile limit, fifty or more miles from the North Korean coast, to expect a rescue. Any closer, and they were on their own.

THE GOOD NEWS WAS THAT they weren't going in blind. The Phantom carried the newest military and civilian mapping equipment, including a Global Positioning System receiver capable of pinpointing its location to one meter. The receiver was synched to software that plotted the topography of every major body of water in the world. The combination allowed Kang, the navigator, to track their course in real time.

Meanwhile, a satellite transceiver connected the boat to an encrypted radar feed from an E-2 Hawkeye circling above the Yellow Sea. Thanks to the Hawkeye, the Phantom could dodge enemy boats without risking detection

by using its own radar. Beck wanted to do everything possible to stay out of sight. If they got caught in a firefight, they'd already lost. They couldn't outshoot the North Korean navy.

And so Beck had dumped the .50-caliber machine gun the Phantom had carried when it arrived at Osan. In its place, he had added a Zodiac, an inflatable flat-bottomed boat with a small outboard motor. The Zodiac was loaded with fresh water, a first-aid kit, even a spear gun, and hooked to the hull of the Phantom.

Aside from the rafts, Beck, Kang, and Choe hadn't brought much survival gear. They each had a change of clothes, in case they wound up in the water. They had personal transceivers, a more powerful version of the ones used by backcountry skiers, which sent a signal that the Chinooks could track. But they hadn't bothered with body armor or even helmets. Instead Kang, who'd grown up in South Florida, was wearing a Miami Dolphins hat—for luck, he said. They weren't being nonchalant or cynical, Beck thought. They knew they would get out quickly or not at all.

BECK SAT BESIDE KANG, who was tracking the radar link from the Hawkeye on a titanium-hulled laptop attached to the Phantom's dash.

"How's it look around the LZ?" The landing zone.

"Quiet." Kang was thirty-eight, though he looked younger. A tattoo of the ace of spades covered his right forearm, near the elbow. Beck had wondered about the tat for weeks, but he hadn't wanted to ask.

Kang tapped on the laptop's keyboard and the screen lit up with white blips. "That's Incheon. What a real port looks like." He clicked on the keyboard again and the screen returned to the dark area farther west. "And that's North Korea. Dead as a whatever."

The good citizens of the Democratic People's Republic don't need the corruptions of the outside world."

"Yeah. Like food."

"Well, they managed to come up with a nuke," Beck said. "How's the boat running?"

“Choe says it looks great,” Kang said. He said something in Korean to Choe, who nodded vigorously. Beck’s Korean was weak, and Choe’s English was worse, so Kang played translator. Choe tapped the throttles forward. The engines rumbled and the Phantom’s cabin began to vibrate.

Beck looked at his watch. 1725. He wanted to reach the landing zone at exactly 2330. No reason to spend more time in North Korean waters than necessary. The Yellow Sea was flat in the summer. If they wanted they could safely run at sixty knots. But Beck preferred to keep them in the high teens. The slower pace would save fuel and keep noise to a minimum. They would leave here in five minutes, give themselves plenty of time.

But before they went . . . Beck touched the plastic bag in his pocket. He didn’t want to have this conversation, but he saw no other choice. He motioned to Choe to cut the engine. The Phantom sat beside the dock, bobbing on the low waves.

“Before we go—” Beck pulled out the bag. Inside were three glass capsules. “L pills.”

“L pills?” Choe shook his head in confusion.

“L for lethal. Cyanide.” Choe still wasn’t getting it, Beck saw. “Poison. If they catch us. You bite down on the glass.” He took a capsule out of the bag and pretended to put it in his mouth.

Choe slammed a hand against the dash of the boat and stammered angrily in Korean. Kang put a hand on Choe’s arm, but Choe shook him off.

“He says you’re crazy,” Kang said. “He says—”

“Never, never,” Choe said in English.

“He says it’s a sin.”

“Yes, sin.”

“Fine,” Beck said. “But tell him he knows as well as we do, if we get caught, no one’s coming for us. No prisoner exchange. And the North Koreans, they’ll make it hell. These pills, they’re quick, and they work.”

Kang translated, rapid-fire.

“One more thing,” Beck said. “Tell him, he should at least carry it. So he has the choice.”

Choe shook his head, fired back in Korean, and turned away.

“He says no,” Kang said. “He says even talking about it is bad luck.”

Beck ran his tongue over his teeth. His mouth felt dirty and he knew he’d smoked too many Camels this day. “More for me, then. You want yours?”

Kang reached out. Beck shook the little capsule, hardly an inch long, into his palm.

“Remember to give it back to me when we’re done,” Beck said. “You don’t want these lying around the house.”

“Roger that.”

Beck stuffed the baggie with the other two pills into his jacket. He checked the disposable cell phone he’d bought the day before. His station chief had the number. If Langley had decided to abort the mission, the call would have come to this phone. But Beck hadn’t been expecting a call, and sure enough none had come. He looked once more at his watch. 1730.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Go west, young man.” Koreans called the Yellow Sea the West Sea.

“Yes, skipper,” Kang said. “A three-hour tour, right?”

“Something like that.” Beck hummed the famous theme song, hoping to clear the cabin of the bad karma the pills had brought. “Just sit right back and you’ll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip.”

“Think Ginger and Mary Ann will be waiting for us in Pyongyang?”

“Let’s hope we never find out. Sing it with me now. ‘If not for the courage of the fearless crew, the *Minnow* would be lost.’”

“The *Minnow* would be lost.”

If Choe got the joke, he didn’t smile. He looked away, out the front window. He pushed forward on the throttle and the Phantom slid away.



DRINK THIS AND YOU'LL GROW WINGS ON YOUR FEET.

John Wells wound down the throttle with his gloved right hand. Beneath him the engine groaned and the tachometer rolled toward 8,000 rpm and the big black bike jumped forward. Wells leaned close to the bike's angular gas tank to lower his profile against the wind. Still he had to fight to keep upright. The Honda was a meaty motorcycle, heavier and wider than a true racing bike.

Wells lifted his head and peeked at the speedometer. Ninety. He'd imagined faster. Beside him the highway was a blur, the trees beside the road blending into a single leafy cipher. He was halfway between Washington and Baltimore, hardly a rural oasis, but at 3:00 A.M. even the interstate was empty. At this speed the road's curves disappeared in the dark. Interstates were built for bad drivers, Wells knew, grandmothers heading to the mall, truckers high on meth and anxious to get home. They were built with soft curves to forgive mistakes.

Even so, Wells was pushing the limits of this highway. Anything could take him out. A raccoon prospecting for garbage. A car changing lanes and forgetting to signal. A broken bottle blowing out his front tire, sending him

over the handlebars and into eternity. A stupid, pointless way to go. Yet here he was in the dark, as he'd been the week before, and the week before that, on the nights when midnight and 1:00 A.M. came and went and sleep remained foreign territory.

Here the rich, smooth pavement soothed him. The speed made his mind vanish, leaving him with snatches of half-remembered songs, some old, some new. The words blended into a strange poetry he could never remember when the rides were done.

Wells relaxed the throttle and the tach and the speedometer dropped in union. At seventy-five the wind dropped slightly and the Springsteen in his head faded.

From his earlier rides he knew he was approaching the sweet spot. He slowed to sixty as the road lifted him gently over a low hill. The trees disappeared. To his right, a shopping center parking lot glowed under oversized lights. Behind a blue dumpster, two police cars nuzzled beside each other, windows down, the cops inside telling each other stories to make the night pass. Just a four hours to go. It was close to 5:00 A.M., and the sun would be up soon enough. Wells thought of Exley, alone now in their bed, wondering when he'd back, and in how many pieces.

Jennifer Exley, his girlfriend. His boss at the Central Intelligence Agency, where he worked as a—as a what? Hard to say. Last year he and Exley had stopped a terrorist attack that would have dwarfed September 11. Now he was back in Washington, and—how to put this politely?—at loose ends. Osama bin Laden wasn't happy with him, that much was certain. In an hourlong communiqué that even Wells hadn't bothered to sit through, bin Laden had promised eternal glory to anyone who killed him. "Allah will smile on the martyr who sends this infidel to hell. . . ." Yadda yadda yadda. But as a practical matter, Qaeda couldn't touch him, at least in the United States. So Wells was waiting for a new mission. In truth, though, he couldn't imagine what that might be. He wasn't built for desk work.

Meanwhile, he burned his days with three-hour-long workouts, and his nights with these joyless joyrides. Exley hated them, and a week earlier, Wells had promised her they would end. He'd thought he was telling the

truth. But this morning he hadn't been able to stop himself. Exley hadn't argued when he rolled out of bed and pulled on his jeans and grabbed his helmet. No, Exley hadn't argued, hadn't said a word, and Wells supposed he loved her for her silence.

But not enough to stay.

Now Wells flexed his shoulders and stared down the perfect three-lane void ahead. This time when he twisted the throttle he didn't hesitate but instead pulled back as far as he could. The bike surged, and suddenly Wells heard

Just don't play with me 'cause you're playing with fire. . . .

Not the confident strut of Mick Jagger but the bleak, reedy tones of Johnny Thunder.

The engine roared and the speedometer needle jumped from fifty-five to eighty-five and kept going. When it topped one hundred, Wells flattened himself on the gas tank and hung on. For dear life, he thought. Though anyone watching might wonder exactly what those words meant to him. And then everything faded but the wind and the road, the bike jolting off every crease, its wheels caressing the highway, and Springsteen's unmistakable voice in his ears:

Drink this and you'll grow wings on your feet.

Wells glimpsed the speedometer, its white needle past 120, its tip quivering. It maxed out at 125, with the tach in the red zone at 9,000 revolutions per minute. He had never pushed the bike so far. He laid off the throttle and watched himself come back to earth.

A few seconds later, he heard the siren screaming. The lights pulsed red-blue-red-blue in his mirrors, half a mile behind but gaining fast.

He flexed his hand around the throttle. Part of him wanted to wind it down and take off again. He doubted the trooper could match his speed. He could probably get to the next exit and disappear.

But Wells didn't want to tangle this cop in whatever game he was playing with God, or himself, or the patron saints of the interstate. Instead of taking off, he flicked on his turn signal—see, Officer, I'm careful—and eased the Honda to a stop in the breakdown lane. As he waited, he patted the bike's gas tank as if it were a horse that had just won the Kentucky Derby. Despite

the trouble he was facing, an absurd pride filled him at the speed the machine had achieved.

The Crown Victoria screeched to a stop behind him, its headlights glaring.

“Turn off your vehicle, sir. Now!” Underneath the cruiser’s scratchy speakers, Wells picked up a trace of nervousness. This trooper was probably just out of the academy, stuck on the overnight shift, jumpy about pulling over a triple-digit speeder with no backup. Wells pulled the little black key from the ignition and dropped it on the cracked pavement.

“Off the bike. Now.”

Wells wondered if Exley would appreciate the irony of his being shot in a traffic stop after getting the bike to 125 without a scratch. Probably not. The stative crouched behind the door of his cruiser, hand on the butt of his pistol. He was young, Wells saw. Maybe twenty. He had a thick, square face, but even so he hadn’t lost all his baby fat. “Don’t look at me, sir! Look straight ahead!”

Wells looked straight ahead, wondering why he always got sideways with the cops.

“Helmet on the ground.”

Wells pulled off his helmet. His eyes burned from the wind. Next time he’d wear goggles under the face plate. Next time?

“You have a wallet? Identification?”

“Yes, Officer.”

“In your pants or your jacket?”

“Pants.”

“Take it out. Slowly.” Wells pulled off his gloves and fished at his wallet. “Put it on the ground and kick it to me with your foot.”

“Kick it with my foot? Not my hand?”

“You’re talking back, asshole!” The trooper no longer sounded scared, just pissed. “I have you on the gun at one eighteen.”

Wells dropped his wallet on the ground, and kicked it toward the trooper. The kid was about to get the surprise of his life, he thought.

“Lean forward and put your hands on the bike.”

The metal of the gas tank was cool under his fingers.

“Do not, don’t, move.” The statie grabbed the wallet, flipped it open.

“Mr. Wick? James Wick? That your name?”

“Not exactly, no, Officer.” Might as well tell the kid. When he got brought in, the truth would come out anyway.

“You’re telling me your license is fake?”

“There’s an ID card inside.”

A few seconds later: “Is this real? Is that you?”

“I’d be awful dumb to lie about it.”

“Turn towards me. Slowly.” The officer looked at the CIA identification card in his hand—the one with Wells’s real name on it—then at Wells. “You expect me to believe this crap?”

Then Wells heard the faint thump of a helicopter’s blades. A few seconds later, the trooper heard it too. Together they looked up as the helicopter closed on them, dropping through the night, landing on the side of the highway, a black two-man bird with a long narrow cockpit. The passenger door opened and a man Wells had never seen before stepped out.

The trooper’s mouth dropped open. Wells was just as shocked. The agency had been watching him? Watching these rides? Did he have no privacy left?

“Officer,” the man shouted over the whirr of the rotors, “do you know who this man is?”

The trooper holstered his pistol. “Well, he said—I mean, he said—but I wasn’t sure—”

“You believe him now? Or do I have to get somebody with stars on his collar to talk to you?”

“Yes. I mean no. I mean yes, I believe him.”

Without another word, the man walked back to the helicopter. As it rose off the side of the highway, the trooper rubbed his eyes like a kid waking up from a dream.

“Damn.” The statie shoved the identification card into the wallet and tossed it back to Wells. “I’m sorry, Mr. Wells.”

“You don’t have to apologize. Pulling rank on you like that was a real jerk move.”

“No, no. If I’d known it was you, I never would have pulled you over. That’s the absolute truth.” The officer stepped over to him and extended his hand. He didn’t seem bothered at all by what had just happened.

Can’t even get arrested, Wells thought. When did I turn into such a saint? But he knew exactly when. The moment he shot Omar Khadri in Times Square. Wells wasn’t sorry for what he’d done. If he had a hundred more chances to kill Khadri, he’d take them all. But he was sick of being a hero. He shook the officer’s hand, feeling the sweat on the young man’s palm.

“Won’t you get in trouble, letting me go?”

“Radar gun’s been on the fritz all week. Says one eighteen when it means fifty-eight.” The trooper turned back to his car, then stopped. “Be careful out there, Mr. Wells. We need you safe.”

“You too, Officer. Lot of crazy drivers out there.” Wells meant it ironically—crazy like me—but the trooper didn’t laugh. Wells thought sometimes that no one except Exley would ever laugh at him to his face again, no matter how much he deserved it. No one laughed at heroes. How could he trust a world that took him so seriously?

The trooper returned to his sedan. Wells got back on his bike. At the next exit he turned back to Washington. He kept the Honda at an even sixty-five the whole way home.

WHEN HE GOT BACK TO Logan Circle the black Lincoln sedans with tinted windows were waiting, one on Thirteenth and the other on N. Two men in each, their engines running. As always. Security guards from Langley, there to watch out for him. And watch him, evidently. Wells hadn’t liked having them around before tonight. He liked them even less now. But Vinny Duto had insisted. If nothing else, they would keep the other residents in the building safe, Duto said. He promised that the guards wouldn’t follow Wells or Exley without their permission. Until tonight, they seemed to have kept their side of the bargain.

Wells parked his bike in the building’s garage and went upstairs. As quietly as he could, he opened the door to Exley’s apartment. Their apartment, he

supposed, though he had trouble thinking of it that way. Down the narrow hall filled with black-and-white pictures of Exley's kids, past the little open kitchen. His boots smelled of grit and oil and the highway. He tugged them off. Exley's looked child-sized next to them.

"Jennifer?" he murmured. No answer. She was asleep, or more likely too angry with him to answer.

Exley's old Persian rug scratched his toes as he walked toward the bedroom. She'd picked up the carpet during her posting in Pakistan. It was one of the few possessions she really cared about, its reds faded but the weave still tight. The apartment had only three rooms—this living room, their bedroom, and a spare bedroom where Jessica, Exley's daughter, slept when the kids stayed over.

Exley and Wells had talked about finding something bigger, maybe a row house on Capitol Hill so her kids could have their own bedrooms. David, Exley's son, was ten, too old to sleep on the lumpy couch in the living room. Maybe someplace with a garden for Wells to weed and plant. Someplace they could keep a Lab, a big happy mutt that would slobber all over the house. They had even called a broker, gone to a few open houses. But everything they saw was too expensive, or too run-down, or too big, or small, or . . . The truth was that the house-hunting filled Wells with dread. He had run so long that he could hardly imagine being penned in by four walls and a roof.

Left unsaid was the possibility that the new house might be a place for him and Exley to have a baby of their own. Wells didn't know how he felt about becoming a father, though somehow it seemed less scary than buying a house. He didn't even know if Exley could get pregnant. She was on the wrong side of forty, but women that age had babies these days. Didn't they?

He stepped into her—their—bedroom. The lights were out, but an infomercial for an all-in-one barbecue grill played silently on the little television on her desk. Outside, the sky was just starting to lighten.

"Jenny? You awake? You won't believe what happened tonight." Even as he said the words, he wondered if he should tell her. He didn't want to admit

how fast he was going. Maybe he'd just have to take this up with Duto himself, though he hated visiting the seventh floor of the headquarters building, where Duto had his offices.

Exley stayed silent as he turned off the television, kissed her forehead, smelling the lemon scent of her face wash. He could tell from her uneven breathing that she was awake, but if she didn't want to talk he didn't plan to push. He put the helmet on the nightstand and pulled off his jacket.

In one quick move she rolled over, grabbed the helmet, and threw it at him. But Wells had played linebacker in college and still had a football player's reflexes. He caught it easily and put it on her desk.

"Jenny, I'm sorry. I know I said I wouldn't, but I really needed it tonight."

"Where'd you go?"

"Up 95, towards Baltimore."

"How fast?"

"I don't know, Seventy, seventy-five miles an hour. Nothing I can't handle."

"John. Please. Shafer's had a helicopter on you the last couple weeks." Ellis Shafer, their boss at the agency.

"Shafer *what?*" So that's who'd been watching him tonight. "Did Duto put him up to it?"

"Haven't you figured out yet that Vinny Duto couldn't care less about you, John? Shafer did it because *I* asked him to. He said they clocked you at a hundred ten. I wasn't going to tell you, but that's why I asked you to stop."

"Jenny—" He guessed he wouldn't be talking to Duto after all. A small consolation.

"I swear, John, I wish you were out drinking, screwing somebody else." Her voice broke. "Anything but this. Every time you leave I think you're not coming back." He sat beside her on the bed and put his hand on her hip, but she pulled away. "Do you even care if you live or die, John?"

"Of course." Wells tried to ignore the fact that he'd asked himself the same question a few minutes before, with a less certain answer.

"Then why don't you act like it?" She searched his face with her fierce blue eyes. He looked away first, down to her breasts, their tops striated with

tiny white stretch marks. Her milky white thighs. And the scar above the knee where the bullet had hit.

“Sometimes I forget how beautiful you are,” he said.

He heard a police siren whistling to the northeast, one of the precincts of Washington that hadn’t gentrified. The siren wasn’t as close as it sounded, he knew. Wells had spent a decade away from America, living undercover as an al Qaeda guerrilla, slowly ingratiating himself with the group. He’d picked up more than a few survival tricks along the way, including the knowledge that gunshots and sirens carried much farther at night than during the day. Just another bit of wisdom that no longer did him much good.

“Your hand,” she said. He looked down. His left hand was trembling on his jeans. She caressed it in hers until the shaking stopped.

“I don’t know what I’m doing anymore,” he said. For a while they were silent. She squeezed his hand and he found his voice again. “You know, I thought when I woke up in the hospital and saw you there that it would all be okay. That I was out on the other side. And now . . .” In the distance a second siren rang out, then a third. Trouble in the night.

“Even Utah isn’t Utah,” Exley said. He looked at her questioningly. “When I was a kid, I used to love to ski. Before everything went bad with my family.” She slipped a hand around his shoulder. “Nothing scared me. Bumps, steepes, any of it. I didn’t want to hit puberty because I thought having a chest would mess up my balance. And it did.”

She arched her back, jokingly thrusting out her breasts, and despite his gloom Wells felt himself stir. He imagined her, a narrow boyish body cutting down the mountain, her ponytail tucked away. “They must have been surprised when they saw you were a girl.”

“Mainly we went to Tahoe. We did it on the cheap, stayed in motels, brought sandwiches to the mountain. The most fun I remember having as a kid. But I always wanted to go to Utah.” She ran a hand down his arm. “My dad didn’t want to. Said we didn’t have the money. But I pestered him and finally, when I was twelve, we flew to Salt Lake City. Me, my brother, my mom and dad. The whole happy family. My mom didn’t ski much, but she always came.”

“She was afraid to leave him alone,” Wells said. “Poor Exley.” He kissed her neck softly.

“Lots of people have alcoholic dads.”

Yeah, but you’re the one I love, he thought. And didn’t say, though he didn’t know quite why.

Outside the sirens faded. Wells walked to the window, looked at the agency’s guards in the Crown Victorias. He turned back to the bed. Exley had her legs folded under herself kittenishly now.

“You listening, John?”

He laid a hand on her knee.

“Anyway. It’s snowing when we get to Utah. Snows all night. The next morning we drive up to Alta. I’m so excited. The best skiing in the world. And we get there, we buy our tickets. We get on the lift . . .”

He tried to slide his hand between her legs, but she squeezed them tight.

“We get to the top. And we ski down.”

“So you ski down? That’s the story? How was it?”

“Great. But, you know. It was *skiing*, like Tahoe. Just skiing. And I kept thinking that it was costing money we didn’t have, and I should have loved it, not just liked it. So somehow I was disappointed, even though I knew I shouldn’t be. I didn’t say anything. But my dad, he figured it out. Because at the end of the day, he said to me, ‘Even Utah isn’t Utah, huh?’” She paused, then continued. “There’s no magic bullet. Nobody in the world will blame you for feeling like hell, needing time to put yourself back together. But this—you’re not being fair to yourself. Or me.”

He knew she was right. But he wanted to ask her, how long until I don’t dream about tearing men apart, gutting them like fish? How long until I sleep eight hours at a stretch? Six? Four? Until I can talk about what I’ve seen without wanting to tear up a room?

“You’re not crazy, John,” she said. “You don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to. People specialize in this stuff.”

“A shrink?”

“They’re professionals.” The desperation in her voice disturbed Wells more than anything she’d said, gave him a clue how hard he’d made her life.

“I’ll be okay. I just need to figure out what’s next. I promise.” He felt himself close up again. Good.

“Or me. You can talk to me if you want.”

“I will. But not now.” Instead he reached for her. She pushed him away, but just for a moment. And for a little while they thought only of each other.