

PART ONE

**FORWARD OPERATING BASE JACKSON,
ZABUL PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN
PRESENT DAY**

Growing up in the scrubland of west Texas, Ricky Fowler had done some stupid things. The usual nonsense, nothing the cops cared much about. Mailbox baseball. Spraying a 1 beside the 75 on speed-limit signs. A couple times, drunk, he shot firecrackers at bulls. Roman candles and such. He wasn't proud of that little trick, but he never hit anything. The longhorns didn't even notice.

But these Afghans, they took the cake on stupid. Yeah, they were tough fighters, tricky little bastards who could get by forever on tea and stale bread. But tough and smart were two different things. Guys in his platoon had a name for the nonsense they saw outside the wire every day: *SATs*. Stupid Afghan Tricks.

Like last month, on patrol, this dude sitting on a donkey so short the dude's feet touched the ground. Plus the donkey's sides were so loaded with sticks that it looked like it had a Christmas tree growing out of its butt. Even so the rider was grinning like he'd won the lottery, like, *That's right, suckers. I got a donkey, so I do not have to walk. How you like me now?* Smiling with those big white choppers all the Afghans had,

even though they'd never seen toothpaste in their lives. Maybe because they couldn't afford to drink soda. Fowler didn't know. Mystery number 101 about this country.

Fowler was an E-3, a private first class, in 1st Squad, 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Stryker Brigade. The unit's name didn't make much sense. The Army didn't have but four Stryker brigades. But Fowler had given up trying to figure out the military's logic on names, or anything else.

For six months, 3rd Platoon had been more or less orphaned from the rest of its company, peeled off to provide extra support for the supply convoys that ran on Highway 1 from Kandahar to Kabul. The convoys ran only once or twice a week, so the rest of the time, they got thrown onto random jobs that other units in the brigade didn't want. They set up roadblocks to register motorcycles. They guarded detained Afghans who were scheduled to be moved to the big jail at Kandahar. They didn't have a defined area of responsibility, and they rarely saw their company captain, much less their battalion commanders. As far as Fowler could see, the battalion had more or less forgotten they existed.

At least they lived on the same base as the rest of Bravo, Forward Operating Base Jackson. Jackson was a pile of trailers and blast walls in Zabul province. Like its neighbor to the west, Kandahar province, Zabul was the ass end of Afghanistan. No mountains here. Western Zabul and Kandahar were a mix of low brown hills and desert. Its soil supported two crops: poppies and the Taliban. More opium grew in Kandahar and the next-door province of Helmand than in the rest of the *world* put together. Not that you'd know it. Southern Afghanistan was dirt-poor. Literally. The locals lived in mud-walled compounds, no electricity or plumbing, just a bunch of dusty kids and goats and sheep.

But here they were, 3rd Platoon, the Lost Boys of Bravo Company.

Now they were going down to Hamza Ali, a speck of a village fifteen miles from their base, for a “strongman show.” Sounded to Fowler like they’d be seeing more Stupid Afghan Tricks.

The show itself was a perfect example of the kind of jobs the platoon always got. It was part of COIN, which stood for counterinsurgency warfare. COIN meant, get into the villages and show the locals how much you want to help them. Pretend to care while they yell at one another about who stole whose goat. Give them a few bucks to rebuild the walls that the Strykers knocked over. Help them build a real country. Back in Vietnam, it had been called “hearts and minds.”

Fowler bet that COIN looked good on the presentations the generals gave the president. In reality, far as he could see, the Afghans were as close to building a real country as the hamsters he’d had in first grade. They were happy enough to take the free food and blankets and radios that the Army gave them. Then they kept their mouths shut when the Talibs came by planting bombs. They knew that sooner or later Fowler and his buddies would pack up and go home, and the Talibs would settle every score.

The Afghans might be stupid, but they weren’t *dumb*.

Meanwhile, when the elders of Hamza Ali invited Colonel Sean Brown, the commander at FOB Jackson, to see a show at their school, he followed the COIN doctrine. He said yes quick as if they’d offered him fifty-yard-line Cowboys–Giants tickets. Not that Brown had any intention of going. He kicked the visit to his executive staff, who sent it all the way down to 3rd Platoon.

ON THIS MISSION—using the word *mission* loosely—the drive was the most dangerous part. A lottery, more or less. The Strykers were armored personnel carriers that carried eleven guys, two driving and nine

in the hole. They were twenty-ton beasts, with tall wheels and inch-thick armor. They looked indestructible.

But they weren't. The Taliban's most lethal weapon was what the Army called IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, giant homemade land mines. A big enough IED, say one built out of an old artillery shell, could turn a Stryker's passenger compartment into a nine-man oven. A Stryker from Jackson had gotten popped about three months back. The bomb was huge, two 155-millimeter shells, a thousand pounds of explosive. Six guys had died. The others had been taken to the Army's burn center at Fort Bliss in San Antonio. Word was they didn't have faces anymore.

The good news was that bombs that big were rare. The bad news was that riding in the Strykers still stank. They had no windows or side doors, just hatches on top and a ramp in back. Fowler understood the logic. Doors and windows were weak points. The Stryker was meant to be a vault on wheels. But the inside felt like a vault, too, a cramped hold stinking of fear-sweat, cut off from the world except for a little screen that ran black-and-white video from the camera on the hull. Once the back ramp closed, the guys inside couldn't do anything but wait. Not for nothing did soldiers call the Strykers Kevlar coffins.

Some guys slept during rides. Not Fowler. Inevitably, he caught himself thinking of the idiotic cartoon Smurfs. In almost every episode, the Smurfs, those miserable blue nitwits, wound up on the run from the evil wizard and his cat. Along the way, they whined constantly to Papa Smurf: "How much farther, Papa Smurf?" "Not far now." A few seconds later: "How about now? Much farther now, Papa Smurf?" "No, not too much." And then: "What about now? Is it much—" Until finally Papa Smurf, that old coot, lost his temper and yelled, "Yes, it is!" It was, too. Much farther. But in the end the Smurfs got where they were go-

ing. No cartoon IEDs ever blew their cartoon asses to cartoon heaven. Fowler figured that was why he found them comforting.

Today at least they were on a hard-packed road, only a few big rocks to bounce them around. Even so, the convoy never got out of second gear. Outside of Highway 1, travel on Afghan roads was excruciatingly slow. The lead Stryker was equipped with the equivalent of a mine-sweeping snowplow, a steel harness that pushed thick concrete wheels. The harness was attached to the Stryker's front end, so the wheels rolled about a dozen feet ahead of the truck. They were supposed to set off bombs before the Stryker reached them.

But the wheels worked only on "pressure-plate" mines, those that had a simple fuse set off by the weight of a vehicle. Lately, the Taliban were using more "command-detonated" mines, which exploded when an insurgent set them off. So the driver of the lead Stryker stopped whenever he saw freshly dug dirt patches or suspicious pieces of road-side trash. The delays lasted anywhere from minutes to hours, if a mine was found. Meanwhile, the Strykers in the rest of the convoy idled. *How much farther now?*

TWO HOURS AFTER LEAVING Forward Operating Base Jackson, the convoy reached Hamza Ali. On the monitor inside Fowler's truck, low brick buildings replaced empty fields. "Dismount in two," Sergeant First Class Nick Rodriguez, the platoon's senior enlisted man, said.

Sergeant Coleman Young—one of the lucky guys, the ones who slept—grinned at Fowler. Young was squat and muscular and as close to a friend as Fowler had in the platoon. "Been watching that screen for us? Worst TV in the world. You know watching it makes no difference as to whether we hit a bomb. You do know that, right?"

"You missed out today." Fowler didn't mind the ribbing. Not from Young.

"Yeah?"

"Two crazy Afghan chicks getting it on. Behind the burqa, you know." *Behind the burqa* had become a catchphrase for 3rd Platoon. It meant everything and nothing.

The Stryker stopped. "Ramp down in fifteen," Rodriguez said. "Blue"—American soldiers—"left and right, so keep those safeties on."

Fowler made sure his Kevlar vest was tight and checked his rifle. He stretched his legs and wiggled his toes inside his boots three times, *right, left, right*, his end-of-ride ritual. The Stryker's back ramp cranked down, kicking up gray-brown dust. One by one the men stepped out. "Back to reality," Young said.

"This is reality?"

"I hope not."

The school was newly built, two stories with real windows and a chimney pumping a stream of black smoke into the sky. "Hamza Ali Primary and Secondary School," a sign read in English. "Funded by United States Agency for International Development."

"Your tax dollars at work," Fowler said.

"Not *my* tax dollars. Fowler, even you must know you pay no taxes as a member of the military serving in a war zone. You keep all twenty-five grand this year."

"Plus all the chow I can eat."

"Lucky you."

"Heads up," Rodriguez shouted to the platoon. "Let's go!"

Rodriguez directed eight guys to stand sentry. The rest followed him and Lieutenant Tyler Weston, the platoon commander, to a dirt field behind the school. The low sun stuck in their eyes and turned them into teardrop shadows.

Weston had taken off his Kevlar and was wearing only his uniform. Soldiers called the practice *bucking*. Officers bucked at these events to prove that they trusted their Afghan hosts. Fowler thought bucking was idiotic. But then, he wasn't an officer, or much of a soldier either. He'd realized after a few weeks that he didn't belong in the Army. He got rattled too easily. He wasn't a coward, not exactly. He went outside the wire like everybody else. But he was scared a lot. The fear slowed him down. And being slow was dangerous. The guys who separated themselves from their fear, who moved fast and sure, those were the guys everybody leaned on. Fowler didn't like Rodriguez, the platoon's senior enlisted man. But he knew Rodriguez was a better soldier than he'd ever be. The Army had trained Fowler how to move, handle a radio, strip a rifle, but all the training in the world couldn't strip the fear from his heart.

So Fowler thought, and not for the first time, as an Afghan man stepped forward and shouted, "Welcome, soldiers! Welcome, America!" He went on in Pashtun for a couple minutes, *baka-baka-baka*. The platoon didn't have an interpreter along, so none of the soldiers knew what he was saying, but the Afghans seemed to like the speech. When he was finished, Weston and Rodriguez stepped forward, holding a black bag. Weston opened it, tossed out a half dozen soccer balls.

"The United States is pleased to present this gift to the schoolchildren of Hamza Ali," Weston said. He chipped one of the balls toward the school's back wall. Two boys took off after it.

"How is this nonsense winning a *war* for us," Young said under his breath to Fowler. "Giving them soccer balls? While they kill us with IEDs. Killing me *softly*." These last three words delivered falsetto.

"With his song."

"Cracker boy knows the Fugees."

“Cracker boy, that’s a compliment, ’cause I can roll.”

“Tell yourself that.”

“You think you’re cool because you know the Fugees, Coleman? Everybody knows the Fugees. My grandma knows the Fugees and she’s been dead five years.”

“I am the stupidest black man in the world, coming over here to fight this war. My uncle got two fingers blown off in Vietnam but at least he got drafted. What’s my excuse?”

Fowler was spared from answering when two men and a boy stepped out of the school’s back door. One man had thick black hair and wore a powder blue warm-up suit. The other carried a canvas bag and a sledgehammer. The boy was shirtless and wore nylon pants, canary yellow emblazoned with white racing stripes.

“A sledgehammer,” Young said. “Stupid Afghan Tricks. Oh, yes.”

Without warning, the boy sprinted toward them and launched himself into a cartwheel and then three backflips. The man in the tracksuit followed with flips of his own. He finished beside the boy, picked him up, casually threw him in the air. The boy landed cat-quick and danced in a low furious whirl, kicking out his legs, the fabric of his yellow pants catching the sun. When the boy finished, the man raised his hands and said, in English, “Please welcome to Parwan”—he tapped his chest—“and Khost.” He pointed to the boy. “Famous father-and-son acrobat. Please like show.”

“How about some applause,” Sergeant Rodriguez said. The soldiers clapped as Parwan unzipped his jacket, revealing a tight black T-shirt. Afghan men insisted on modesty for women but showed off their own bodies at any provocation, Fowler had noticed.

When the applause ended, the man and the boy walked to opposite sides of the field. They turned and faced each other like cowboys about

to duel. Then they sprinted at each other. Just before they were about to collide, Parwan ducked low and his son jumped. He flipped over his father's head and landed and spread his arms wide like an Olympic gymnast. Pure energy. Even Young clapped, though as a rule he was impossible to impress.

Parwan and Khost bowed to the crowd. The second man stepped forward and spun the sledgehammer over his head, an Afghan Thor. The hammer was handmade and brutal, a dull silver log flecked with red spots that hinted at a thousand atrocities. When he was finished showing off the hammer, he reached into the canvas bag and pulled out a board laced with nails.

Beside him, the boy leaned backward until his palms touched the ground. His head was upside down. His skinny stomach arched high into the air. The man lowered the board onto the boy's naked belly—nails first. The crowd was silent now. The man picked a flat brick out of the bag and placed it atop the board. He knelt and held the board steady as Parwan picked up the hammer—

“Oh, no,” Fowler said involuntarily—

And brought it down onto the brick. Which snapped gunshot loud. The nails quivered. The boy's stomach trembled. Parwan dropped the hammer, raised the two halves of the broken brick. The boy stood. A dozen crimson spots flecked his stomach, an instant case of chicken pox. Otherwise he didn't seem hurt. He touched his fingers to his stomach and raised them to show their crimson tips and kissed them. Father and son stood side by side and bowed as the men in the audience roared their approval.

“How do you win a war against people who break bricks on their kids for fun?”

Fowler had no answer for that.

THEN THE SHOOTING STARTED.

A short burst of AK fire, five or six rounds, a soft popping from the northwest. Sound traveled easily in the air here. Not much ambient noise. Fowler figured the shots were a way off. The threat wasn't immediate, if it was a threat at all. Fifteen seconds later a single shot followed. Then silence. Weston and Rodriguez murmured to each other. Rodriguez ducked his head to his shoulder, murmured into his radio. "We're taking a walk," he said to Fowler and the rest of 1st Squad. Fowler wished that they would let the Talibs come to them for once, instead of the other way around. But Rodriguez wasn't asking his opinion.

Back at the Stryker, Rodriguez grabbed his backpack and then huddled up the squad—seven men in all, since 1st Squad's driver and vehicle commander were staying in the village on sentry duty. "Lieutenant wants us to take a look-see for those shooters. Rest of the platoon's staying here. It's probably nothing, and he doesn't want to mess up the show. What we know, there's a bunch of houses about a klick northwest. A canal runs that way. We'll go in dismounted. We're fishing for them, they're fishing for us. If there's somebody out there, let's take them out. Any questions?"

Rodriguez stepped up to Fowler, tugged on his Kevlar.

"No fear, Private. Say it."

"No fear."

Rodriguez looked over the men. "Huddle up and *Hoo-ah!*" The two syllables were the all-purpose Army cheer—the sound of soldiers coming together.

"Hoo-ah!"

"Hoo-ah!"

"*Hoo-ah!*" Even Fowler felt his spirits rise.

THEY WALKED THROUGH the village's empty streets to the irrigation canal on the edge of town. Seven men. The tip of a sword that stretched halfway across the world. A hundred billion dollars a year to put them here, support them with drones and night-vision optics and ground-penetrating radar and every tool that the Pentagon's procurement managers could imagine, the more expensive the better. Now they walked, as soldiers always had and always would. They turned northwest, walked on either side of the dry irrigation canal, eight feet wide and four feet deep. A gray hole in this gray land. Their footsteps left no trace on the hard ground. They walked slowly. They didn't speak.

Rodriguez put four guys on the left side, three on the right. Fowler was second on the left, twenty yards behind the point. He didn't like the approach. Mud-brick walls dotted the fields around them, low and irregular, along with scrubby bare-branched trees. If they were walking into an ambush, the hostiles would have cover and a clear field of fire. But Rodriguez was gung ho as a rule, and the platoon hadn't sniffed a firefight in months. Fowler thought Rodriguez was probably hoping to engage.

They moved toward two shapeless clusters of huts, none more than ten feet high, protected by low walls. Donkeys and goats munched on garbage in a hand-built pen. No doubt everyone who lived here was related, a dozen families of kissing cousins.

Fowler kept his eyes up, looking for movement on the roofs. If any hostiles were hiding here, the ambush would start before 1st Squad got too close. For the most part, the Talibs used simple guerrilla tactics. They blew bombs at a distance and opened up with their AKs, trying to get American soldiers to chase them into fields of IEDs.

But the ambush didn't come. The soldiers stepped closer, their

boots scabbling along the canal's edge. On the left, one house had been painted bright blue. But sun and wind had bleached its paint until only a few snatches of color remained. All of Afghanistan felt drained of color to Fowler. Reduced to monochrome.

Rodriguez raised his left hand. The centipede of soldiers stopped. Rodriguez squatted low. Fowler followed his eyes toward a piece of metal that looked like the top of a soup can. He was trying to decide whether he was looking at a mine or a piece of trash. Finally, Rodriguez poked at the metal with the tip of his M-4. It flipped away harmlessly and skittered into the canal. Rodriguez stood, twirled his finger: *Keep moving.*

Two Afghans walked out of the hut that had once been blue. Both wore the *shalwar kameez*, the simple long tunic and pants that were standard for Afghan men. But one was wearing distinctly un-Afghan headgear, a black cowboy hat. "Halt," Sergeant Kevin Roman, on point, shouted in English, lifting his M-4. The two men stopped, raised their hands. The squad closed around them, forming a loose semicircle around the men.

"Gentlemen," Rodriguez said. "Why were you shooting?"

The men looked blankly at him.

"You have Taliban here?"

"Taliban? *La, la.*"

"Anybody speakee the English?" Rodriguez said. "Come on." He turned toward the huts, where little boys and girls peeked at them. "Anybody home?" Rodriguez shouted. The kids disappeared. Fowler caught movement from a hut maybe fifty yards ahead and swung his rifle to cover. A man in a blue *shalwar kameez* stepped out, his hands high. "Hello!" he yelled. "Don't shoot! Everything is okay."

The man walked toward them. Waddled, really. He was heavy, with a wide, rolling gait. He reminded Fowler of an Afghan they'd seen a

couple months ago at a checkpoint they'd run maybe thirty miles from here. But he didn't seem to recognize them. Fowler stepped toward the guy, but Rodriguez shook his head. "I got this, Private."

"I feel like I've seen this guy before, Sergeant."

"Yeah, well, they look alike." Rodriguez was right on that. The Pashtuns had dark brown skin and brown eyes and thick beards and big noses and hands and feet. When the guy got close, Fowler saw he had a nasty scar down the right side of his neck, like somebody had just missed getting his head on a platter. Fowler was sure he'd seen that scar before. Weird.

"You are looking for Taliban?" Scar said.

"Always, my man."

"No Taliban here."

"Who was shooting at us?"

The guy shook his head. Rodriguez adjusted the plug of dip in his mouth with his tongue and spit a stream of brown saliva at the canal. His dipping and his temper had earned him the nickname Volcano.

"We heard shots."

"No shooting."

"Liar. Here's what we're gonna do. Roman, come with me. I want to talk with this dude in private. In his compound. Fowler, Young, you stay here, keep an eye on the huts. B Team, you flare left, case we spook somebody out the side."

"What about the right side?"

"Right side's going to have to look after itself. Can't do more with just seven guys."

Fowler didn't like the plan. They were looking at only a few huts, but even so, they could be walking into an ambush. The Taliban didn't usually set up attacks inside villages, but there was a first time for everything.

"You steady, Private?" Rodriguez said.

Have to rub my face in it, don't you, Sergeant? Every time. Can't help yourself. An ugly thought flitted across Fowler's mind, an idea he couldn't have imagined having when this tour began. *I hope somebody lights you up. Mine, ambush, whatever. I hope you die, Rodriguez.*

"Like a rock."

"Good." Rodriguez walked toward the Afghan man in quick, confident steps. "Quicker you show us around, quicker we're done."

The other two Afghans tried to follow, but Young lifted his rifle fractionally and they stepped back. When Rodriguez and Roman were out of earshot, Fowler stepped toward Young.

"Coleman, I'm sure I've seen that guy before. At a checkpoint."

"Like Rodriguez said, they all look alike."

"They don't all have a scar like that."

"More than you think."

"I can't believe we've still got three months left. I can't do it."

"You can. You will. And come home a hero."

"Hero."

"That's what they call us, isn't it?"

A hundred yards ahead, the scarred man pulled open a gate. Rodriguez and Roman followed him inside. The way they were moving bothered Fowler. Rodriguez might be a dickwad, but he was a good soldier, always vigilant. Now he seemed relaxed. As if he were certain that nothing inside the gate would threaten. Fowler had the strange feeling that this patrol had been a sham, its only purpose to get Rodriguez to that compound. He watched the gate close and wondered why.

2

MISSOULA, MONTANA

The house at the end of the flagstone driveway was wide and brick and faced west toward the Bitterroot Mountains. It had two chimneys and a three-car garage. It looked . . . in truth, it looked like a nice place to live. Like it had a den filled with books that had actually been read and a refrigerator stuffed with leafy green vegetables. John Wells hadn't gotten inside and he was already feeling defensive.

Though the flagstone was a bit much.

Wells rolled up the driveway, which turned to asphalt beside the house. A thickly padded pillar supported a regulation-size basketball backboard. A teenage boy faced the hoop. He dribbled the ball between his hands like a three-card-monte dealer hiding an ace. He was maybe six-foot-two and, despite the cool fall air, wore only knee-length white shorts and a blue Boise State T-shirt. As Wells drove up the flagstone, the kid stepped back and launched a fadeaway jumper. It traced an easy arc and dropped through the net.

Wells parked his rental Kia a few feet from the boy and grabbed the bouquet of orchids and lilies he'd bought in downtown Missoula. He didn't want to open the door, but after a couple seconds he forced himself out.

The boy kept dribbling, skittering the ball between his legs. He was still growing into his body. His chest was flat, but his calves and forearms were thick with muscle. He had Wells's deep brown eyes and solid nose, and his hair was long and straight and pulled back in a ponytail. He launched another fadeaway jumper, this one just short. Wells collected the rebound.

"You must be Evan." *You must be my son. Though I'm more or less guessing, since I haven't seen you since you were a baby.*

"I must be."

"I'm John." Wells stepped in for a hug, but the boy took a quick half step back and extended a hand.

"Nice to meet you." Evan spoke softly, his words clipped flat. No hint of emotion. He sounded like a state trooper talking to a driver he'd pulled over for speeding. Without affect, the psychiatrists said. Though not without effect. Wells watched his son watching him. He supposed he'd earned that voice.

"Practicing your jumper."

"Actually working on my dunks."

"Right."

Evan cocked his head at the flowers. "Those for me? I'm more into roses as a rule."

"Noted."

Evan dribbled twice, threw up a fadeaway. This time the ball clanged off the front of the rim and bounced at Wells, who laid the flowers on the ground and corralled it.

"Coach tried to get me interested in ninth grade, but football was more my game," Wells said. "Now I wish I'd listened to him. All those hits add up. I still feel some of them." Though Wells was lying. He wouldn't have traded football for anything. He'd loved the sport's raw power, its velocity and contact. War without death.

He spun the basketball in his hands, dribbled once, flung up a jumper. The ball bounced off the back rim. Evan grabbed it and tucked it under his arm, an oddly adult gesture, as if he were in charge and Wells the teenager. His self-possession impressed Wells.

“You should probably tell my mom you’re here.”

“Sure.” Wells turned to the house as Heather—his ex-wife—opened the door. Her hair, once a light honey brown, was streaked with gray and cut short, just above her shoulders. She and Wells had divorced barely a year after Evan was born, when Wells left them to go undercover in Afghanistan and infiltrate al-Qaeda for the first time. These were the prehistoric days before September 11. Wells had seen Heather only once since. Now he crossed the driveway and the stairs and hugged her. She hesitated and then reached for him and stretched her arms around his back. She was tiny, half his size. “You look great,” he said.

“You lie.”

“Never.”

“Fairly often, I suspect. But come on in anyway.”

“What about . . .” Wells nodded at the side of the house, where Evan was once again shooting jumpers.

“Let him be. He’ll come in on his own once he sees us talking.”

SHE LED HIM THROUGH a house that was as handsome as Wells had imagined from the outside. The American dream alive and well in three dimensions. The pictures stung the most. Heather had remarried, a lawyer named Howard. They had two children, George and Victoria—Wells had looked up their names this morning. Family photos covered every wall. Victoria playing soccer. Evan spinning a basketball on his index finger. George standing on the Golden Gate Bridge. The five of

them somewhere in Mexico or Central America, standing on a ruin, grinning.

Wells knew that the photos weren't for him. They'd been up long before he arrived. But he couldn't help feeling they were meant as an object lesson, a reminder of the life he'd traded away. Though he was probably fooling himself. Probably this life had never been open to him.

"They're beautiful. All of them."

"Thank you."

"And they get along?"

"You know, they're kids, they fight, but the fact that Evan has a different dad, that's never part of it. At least as far as I know."

"That's great." *What about me?* Wells wanted to ask. *Does he ever ask about me?* Even in his head, the question sounded impossibly self-centered.

Heather put Wells's flowers in a glass pitcher and they sat at a marble-topped island in the kitchen. She didn't ask whether he wanted anything to drink or eat, a reminder that he wasn't truly welcome.

"Howard's not around? Or the kids?"

"At the mall. And then a movie. I think something in three-D."

"I'd like to meet them."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Give me a little credit."

"I know you, that's all."

Her certainty nettled Wells. "What do you know?"

"You're very goal-oriented, John. 'Must reconnect with son.'"

Heather delivered that last sentence in a mock Terminator voice.

"'Building family ties, very important. Highest priority.'"

Wells nearly flared up, said something like, *Still bitter after all these years*. But he hadn't come this far to argue. "I don't even think of you

as an ex anymore, Heather. We've been apart so much longer than we were together."

"Another way of saying you only called to see Evan."

"It's another way of saying I hope we can be friends."

"Sure, John. Friends." She nodded at the absurdity of the idea. "I want you to know I don't regret anything about us anymore, John. You gave me that boy and that's plenty."

"Why'd you let me come, then?"

"Wasn't my choice. When you called, I asked Evan what he wanted, and he wanted to see you. And he's old enough to decide for himself." She plucked out an orchid from the bouquet, twirled it in her fingertips so its delicate scent bloomed. "So how's D.C.?"

"I haven't been there in months. Like I told you, I quit—"

"Officially. But that doesn't mean anything, right? And especially not for you."

"It does and it doesn't," Wells said, thinking about his last mission. Even though he'd been working privately, he'd used the CIA. And vice versa. "It adds a level of complexity. But anyway I'm mostly up in New Hampshire these days."

"With the new girlfriend."

"Her name's Anne. And yes."

"She's a cop, you said?"

"Correct."

"You going to make an honest woman of her?"

"She doesn't need me to make her an honest woman."

"Same old John. You must be bored. You always loved playing on the front lines of history."

Wells couldn't tell whether she was being ironic. "That's not how it feels."

"No?"

"It feels like I'm putting my finger in a dike."

"John Wells, the little Dutch boy."

"More like a plumber. With a very specialized skill set."

Evan walked into the kitchen, basketball under his arm.

"Hi, Mom." He gave Wells a big fake grin. "Hi, *Dad*."

"Take a shower and lose the stink," Heather said. "And not just how you smell. John came a long way to see you."

"Good for him."

"And no girl showers today. Keep it short."

"I thought you wanted me to get clean."

"No need to wear out the plumbing. John probably gets himself clean in twenty-two seconds with a Brillo pad."

"I'm in the field, I find a clean patch of stone and strip down and just scrape myself across it," Wells said.

"And he waxes. Less hair to get dirty."

"Every inch. Little-known Special Forces trick."

"You two are *gross*," Evan said. He backed out of the kitchen.

"Thank you for that," Wells said, after Evan's footsteps had disappeared upstairs.

"For what?"

"Getting him to smile. He may have agreed to this, but it doesn't look like he's aching to bond."

"You need to understand, John. All you can hope for at this point is to be a friend. Someone maybe he'll call if he's back east. And that's the absolute best."

"I get it."

"What were you expecting, John? You'd sail in and five minutes later everything would be cool?"

"I told you I get it."

Upstairs, a shower kicked on. While they waited, Heather filled him

in on Evan's life, his difficulties with AP Biology, his love of basketball, his dream college—the University of California at San Diego. “I don't know if he has the grades for it.”

“What about girls?” Wells said.

“Nothing serious. These kids don't really date. They text one another and sneak over to one another's houses and we can't do much about it unless we want to lock him in his bedroom all the time. Which would only make it worse. And I don't want to be a hypocrite either. Not like I was a nun in high school. So I told him to be careful, not to get anyone pregnant, and he looked at me like, ‘I'm not an idiot. I know.’”

Evan reappeared freshly scrubbed fifteen minutes later. “Ready, Pops?”

“Where to?”

“I figured you could take me into the backcountry, show me how to blow stuff up. Survival training. Make a *man* out of me, know what I'm saying?”

Wells looked at Heather. “Please tell me he's joking.”

“Of course he's joking.”

“Of course I'm joking. We're going to this coffeehouse downtown. By the U. It's kind of a cliché, but the coffee's good.” Evan kissed his mother on the cheek. “You were right. He doesn't have a great sense of humor.”

“I warned you.”

“I'm in the room,” Wells said. “I can hear you. Both of you.”

GRIZZLY COFFEE had overstuffed couches and grainy black-and-white photos of car accidents on the walls and a community corkboard with offers of rides to Seattle. The guy behind the counter had an ornate

zombie tattooed across his right arm, its red-and-yellow eyes iridescent in the late-day sun.

Wells ordered a large coffee, skim milk. He was obscurely pleased to see Evan do the same. The tables in the back were empty.

“Here we are, father and son, together at last,” Evan said.

“I want to thank you for seeing me, Evan. From everything your mom’s said, you’re an amazing young man.”

“I’m here because I figured you wanted to give me the key to a secret bank account with, like, a hundred million dollars.”

“If I had it, it would be yours. I just thought maybe we could get to know each other.” As soon as Wells said the words, he wished he hadn’t. *Get to know each other*. Like this was a first date. A bad one, with no chemistry.

“I just threw up in my mouth.”

Wells sipped his coffee and waited for Evan to talk. To distract himself, he watched the barista make drinks, working the knobs and handles of the machines behind the counter as expertly as a nineteenth-century trainman running a steam engine.

“You’re just going to stare into space until I start talking,” Evan said after a few minutes.

“Waiting is one thing I’m good at.”

“Fine. You win. *Ve have vays of making you talk*. So let’s talk.”

“I just wanted to tell you face-to-face, I thought about you all these years. Wondered how you were, what your life was like.”

“You had a weird way of showing it. I know you were gone a long time. But you’ve been back five years now, more, and you never tried to see me.”

“Your mom didn’t want me to, and I respected her wishes.”

“Yeah. You seem like the kind of guy who does what other people tell you.”

"I look at you, I don't see a stranger. I see how we're connected. And I know how you're feeling."

"Of course you do, *Dad*. You know me so well—"

"Okay, maybe that wasn't the best way to phrase it—"

"Can we stop talking now?"

Wells played what he hoped would be his winning card. "Is there anything you want to know about me? What I've been doing?"

"I know. You've been saving the world. *Call of Duty: John Wells Edition*. Only problem is, I don't see how the world's been saved. Looks like a mess to me."

"Wait till you're my age."

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

Wells was ready for this question, at least. He'd decided years before that Evan deserved the truth. "Yes."

"How many?"

"More than one."

"More than one. What kind of answer is that? More than ten?"

Wells hesitated. "Yes."

"In self-defense?"

"That's not really a yes-or-no question."

"I think it is."

"What if Chinese cops are chasing you, and if they catch you, they'll turn you over to someone who's going to kill you? So you shoot them even though they're just doing their jobs? Or say it's 2001, after September eleventh, and you're undercover with some Talibs and you have to make contact with your side, the American side. But the only way to do that is to kill the guys you're with. So you do."

"How come you put it in the second person? You mean *I*. 'So I do. I killed them.'"

"That's right. I killed them." He'd executed them, no warning.

Men he'd known for years. Their skulls breaking and exposing the gray fruit inside.

"Doesn't sound like self-defense."

"It was necessary." Wells leaned across the table, fighting the urge to grab his son by the shoulders. "Evan. I'll tell you about what I've done. Everything I can, except the stuff that's classified and might get you in trouble. But I'm not going to argue the morality. Some things you can't understand unless you've been there."

"That's what guys like you always say. That nobody else gets it."

"These people we fight, they target *civilians*. Innocents." Wells was arguing now, contradicting what he'd said just a few seconds before, but he couldn't help himself. "They strap bombs to kids your age, and blow themselves up in crowded markets."

"When we fire missiles and blow up houses in Pakistan, what's that?"

"I am telling you, I've seen this up close, and we make mistakes, but these guys are not our moral equivalents." Wells wondered whether he should explain that he personally was certain that he'd saved more lives than he'd taken. But they weren't talking about him. They were talking about Iraq, and Afghanistan, and Vietnam. Those long, inconclusive conflicts that ground to a close without parades or treaties. Wars where the United States had a hundred different goals and the enemy had none, except to send American soldiers home in body bags.

"Let me ask you something, then, *Dad*. Suppose I told you in two years, 'Hey, I want to join the Army. Enlist.' Would you be in favor of that?"

"Not as an enlisted man, no."

"But—"

"Soldiers follow orders. If you're concerned about the way we're fighting, you've got to be giving those orders. Be an officer. That's life. You wanted to go to West Point, get your butter bar"—the gold-colored

bar that newly minted second lieutenants received—"I wouldn't be against that."

"But *you* quit. You left the agency."

"Because I was disgusted with the politics inside Langley. But I'll always believe that the United States has the right to defend itself."

"Oh, so that's what we're doing?"

The contempt in Evan's voice tore a hole in Wells's stomach real as a slug. Suddenly, Wells knew that Evan had agreed to see him for one reason only. Evan despised him, or some funhouse vision of him, and wanted him to know. Wells wondered what Heather had told Evan. Or—

"Is this because I wasn't around? Are you mad?"

"I have two real parents. I couldn't miss you any less."

"Listen." Evan stiffened, and Wells knew he'd said exactly the wrong word. Then he repeated it. "Listen. You think you're the only one wondering what we're doing over there? Everybody who's been there asks himself whether we're doing any good."

"But you keep doing it. They keep doing it."

"Because those soldiers don't have the luxury of second-guessing their orders. They do what they're told, and when they're outside the wire, they have to figure out who's a civilian and who's the enemy, and if they guess wrong they die—"

"They're all volunteers. Right? They knew what they were getting into. Whatever we're doing over there, they're not bystanders. They're morally responsible."

"That makes them heroes, Evan. Not villains."

"Just like you."

Wells pushed himself back from the table. He'd pictured meeting his son a hundred times: hiking in Glacier National Park, rafting on the Colorado River, even driving to Seattle for a baseball game, an echo of the road trips he'd taken with his own father to Kansas City. He'd

imagined Evan would want to hear the details of his missions, would ask him about being Muslim. Wells had converted during the long years he'd spent undercover, and he'd held on to the faith after coming back to the United States. He'd even wondered whether he might become something like an uncle who visited once a year. Ultimately, he'd imagined his son telling him, *I want you to be part of my life.*

But somehow he'd never imagined this particular disaster, this fierce, cool boy taking him apart as if they weren't blood at all. The bitterest irony was that Evan's dispassionate anger wasn't far from Wells's own casual cruelty. Wells didn't doubt that, with the right training, Evan would be a Special Forces-caliber soldier. He had the reflexes and the size. Though this might not be the moment to mention that career path.

"Evan. You're a strong young man, you're politically engaged—"

"Don't patronize me—"

"I'm *not*. But you think I'm a war criminal—"

"I didn't say that—"

"Close enough. And if not me, a lot of guys I know. And that's so far from the truth that I'm going to lose my temper soon, and I don't want that. You've got to be able to separate the war from the men who fight."

"The war *is* the men who fight."

"Let me take you home, and in a few years, when you have more perspective, we can try again. If you want."

"I'm never gonna change my mind."

"People your age always say that."

"Let's go."

WELLS WOULD HAVE LIKED to ask Evan about basketball, or girls, or his classes, all the everyday details of life as a teenager. Surely high school

hadn't changed, even if kids flirted now in 140-character bursts instead of whispered phone calls. But they'd left that conversation behind. They drove in silence. When they arrived, Heather waited on the front steps. Evan opened his door before the car had stopped. Wells sat in the car and watched him go. He'd lost his relationship with his only child without ever having one. Neat trick. After Evan disappeared, Wells stepped out of the car.

"Smart kid."

"He is that."

"Doesn't like the war much. Or me."

She turned up her hands.

"You could have warned me."

"I wasn't sure it would go that way and I didn't want to jinx it. I'm sorry."

"I like him, you know. Politically aware, intelligent—he'll run for something one day. Something important. And win."

"I hope so."

"At least I don't have to worry that he misses me. He made that clear."

"Would you rather he did? He felt some terrible lack in his life?"

She shoots, she scores. "Maybe I'll try again in a few years. Meantime, if you or he want to reach me—"

She stood, hugged him. "Good-bye, John."

WELLS DROVE. He'd booked a hotel for two nights, but now he just wanted to roll on 90, let its long twin lanes carry him east. He'd grown up in Hamilton, south of Missoula, and he'd planned to visit the graveyard where his parents were buried. He'd have to wait for another trip to pay those respects.

He wasn't angry with his son for questioning the necessity of war. *Blind faith in your leaders will get you killed*, Bruce Springsteen had said. But Wells could take only the coldest comfort in his pride. He'd lost any chance to connect with the boy. If Evan thought of him at all, it would be as a sperm donor, the man who'd contributed half his DNA and then disappeared.

Wells closed his eyes and counted silently to ten. When he opened them, the wide prairie on either side of the highway hadn't changed. Time to face the truth, leave his son behind.

AND THEN HIS CELL RANG. A blocked number.

"John. You up in the woods, scaring the bears?" Ellis Shafer, his old boss at the agency. He was scheduled to retire in the spring. But Wells figured Shafer would work out a deal to stay. He claimed to have a happy life outside the agency, but he was in no hurry to get to it. Just like Wells. At this moment, Wells knew he'd buy whatever Shafer was selling.

"Montana. Visiting Evan."

"Sojourning."

"Is this call about the size of your vocabulary?"

"Master Duto has something for you. A mission, should you choose to accept it."

Wells was silent.

"Before you say no—"

"I didn't say no."

"Must have gone badly out there."

Wells didn't answer.

"John?"

"I realize you enjoy demonstrating your cleverness at every opportunity, Ellis, but now is not a good time."

“Duto wants you to go to Afghanistan.”

“He forget I don’t work for him anymore?”

“He thinks there’s a problem in Kabul, and I think he’s right.”

“What kind of problem?”

“The kind better discussed in person.”

Sure as night was dark, Duto had an angle here. Angles, more likely. “What’s my excuse?”

“Officially, you’ll be there on a morale mission. Also—and this will be shared privately with senior guys—you’ll be making an overall assessment of the war. Nothing in writing, just impressions that you’ll present when you get home. You go over, spend a couple days at Kabul station. Have dinner with COS”—an acronym that sounded like an old-school rapper but in reality stood for chief of station—“then visit a couple bases, meet the Joes. Talk to whoever you like.”

“Pretty good cover.”

“Yes. Come to Langley, and Duto and I will fill you in on the rest.”

Wells wondered what Evan would make of this offer. No doubt he’d dismiss it as macho crap, a pointless exercise.

“Great,” Wells said. “I’m in.”