



***MONDAY
NIGHT*** **|||**



HEAD

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Monday Night Jihad

Copyright © 2007 by Jason Elam and Steve Yohn. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of football player copyright © by Donald Miralle/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of fire copyright © by Veer. All rights reserved.

Author photos copyright © 2007 by Stephanie Mack. All rights reserved.

Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Published in association with the literary agency of Yates & Yates, LLP, Attorneys and Counselors, Orange, California.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the authors or the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Elam, Jason.

Monday night jihad / Jason Elam and Steve Yohn.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1730-4

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1730-1

1. Terrorism—United States—Fiction. I. Yohn, Steve. II. Title.

PS3605.L26M66 2007

813'.6—dc22

2007038595

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 11 10 09 08
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

JASON ELAM

It is to the real Jesus that I dedicate this book.

STEVE YOHN

*First and foremost for God—this is definitely a
You thing. Also, for Nancy—a true Proverbs 31
woman. I am honored to be spending
my life with you.*

DEDICATION

LORD, WE START WITH YOU. This has been, and will always be, Your project.

Jason thanks Tamy, the kids, and his mother, Evelyn, for their love and encouragement.

Steve thanks Nancy and his daughter for sacrificing so many evenings to this project.

Both Jason and Steve owe a debt of gratitude to Pastor Rick Yohn for his constant support and for being the biggest fan of this book from day one. Thanks go to Linda Yohn, also, for her excellent tough-love proofing skills.

Matt Yates, this bird never would have flown without you. Thanks to you for your practical wisdom and guidance (and, most importantly, for the “research” trip to Del Frisco’s), and also to Jeana and the rest of the Yates & Yates gang.

We had so many go-to experts assisting us in making this a realistic book with a plausible scenario. Special appreciation goes to LTC Mark Elam for teaching us how to hurt people in really nasty ways. Also, huge thanks are owed to Troy Bisgard of the Denver Police Homicide Division, Kurt Peterson of the Denver Police Bomb Squad, and our friends at the Air Force Special Operations Command and the U.S. Secret Service.

Thanks go to Karen Watson and the rest of our new family at Tyndale House Publishers. We

owe a huge debt to Jeremy Taylor for dealing with an editor's worst nightmare—two first-time authors. Also, we greatly appreciate Beverly Rykerd of Beverly Rykerd Public Relations for getting the word out so effectively.

Finally, how can we thank our small group enough for all of your inspiration and prayer through this process? You are the wind beneath . . . well, you know the rest. Our gratitude goes out to the folks at Lemstone Christian Store in Parker for the couch and the coffee and to Fellowship Community Church.

Lastly, we have been blessed by so many others who have encouraged us and prayed for us along the way. Thank you, one and all.

1991

ADHAMIYA

BAGHDAD, IRAQ

Hakeem Qasim picked up the small, sharp rock from the dirt. Tossing it up and down a couple of times, he felt its weight as he gauged his target. He glanced at Ziad, his cousin and closest friend. They both knew the significance of what he was about to do. Wiping the sweat off his forehead and then onto his frayed cotton pants, he cocked his arm back, took aim, and let fly. The rock sailed from his hand, across fifteen meters of open space, in through the driver's-side window of the burned-out Toyota, and out the other side—no metal, no glass, nothing but air.

“Yes!” the two ten-year-old boys shouted in unison as they clumsily danced together in triumph.

They had spent the better part of six days clearing this dirt patch, as attested by their cracked, blistered fingers and by the jagged gray piles in and around the old Corona. Hakeem took pride in the knowledge that his rocks were mostly of the “in” category, while Ziad’s were mostly of the “around.” But to have the final rock of the hundreds, if not thousands, that they had cleared



PROLOGUE

from their newly created soccer field pass all the way through the car could mean only one thing—good luck.

Hakeem was the older of the two by seventeen days. Although he was small for his age, his wiry frame attested to his strength and speed. His uncle Shakir had told him, “You are like the cheetah, the pursuer.” He wasn’t exactly sure what his uncle meant by that, but he loved the picture it put in his mind. Often, when he closed his eyes at night, he dreamed of stalking prey out on the open plains. Hakeem the Cheetah—*watch out, or I’ll run you down*. His complexion was dark, and his black hair was thick and wild. His eyes were a deep brown and had a feline intensity to them that he knew could be unsettling, even to his mother. “Hakeem, you have the eyes of the Prophet,” she would say, sometimes with a shudder.

Ziad was the opposite of his cousin in build. Tall, square shoulders, large head—his father used to call him *Asad Babil*, the “Lion of Babylon,” named after the Iraqi version of the Soviet T-72 tank. Ziad wasn’t the brightest star in the sky, but he was a guy you wanted on your side in a fight.

As the boys scanned the dusty lot, Hakeem felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment, remembering what the field had looked like just a week ago. He glanced to his left, where he had tripped over a rock and badly cut his elbow—the impetus for their renovation. He unconsciously picked the edges of the scab; that rock had been the first to go.

A waft of lamb with garlic and cumin caught Hakeem’s attention, awakening another of his senses. Well, his hunger would be taken care of soon enough. It was Friday, and every Friday (except for the day after the bombs had begun to fall last week) Uncle Ali came over for dinner. It was always a special event, because Ali Qasim was an important man. All the neighbors would bow their heads in respect as he drove by. Father would bow too, in spite of the fact that Ali was the youngest of the three brothers and Hakeem’s father was the eldest.

Even now, Hakeem could see Uncle Ali’s black Land Rover parked next to his house across the field. Beside it was the matching Land Rover that carried the men Ali called his “friends,” although he never talked to them and all they ever seemed to do was stand

outside the house looking around. There was a lot of mystery surrounding Uncle Ali.

Last month, in a day that Hakeem would not soon forget, Uncle Ali had invited the boy to take a ride with him. "Let's see how good my friends are," Ali cried as he hit the gas, burying the other Land Rover in a cloud of dust. They bounced down the dirt roads, laughing and yelling for people to get out of the way.

When they made it out to the main road, Ali had suddenly gotten serious. He reached into his *dishdasha* and handed Hakeem a small handkerchief that had been folded into a square. The boy's excitement grew as he opened one corner after another, discovering inside a bullet with a hole drilled just under the case's base. A thin chain had been threaded through the hole.

"Hakeem, this is a 7.62 mm round that I pulled out of an unexpended AK-47 clip that Saddam Hussein himself was firing outside of his palace."

Hakeem was still too afraid to ask what—or whom—President Hussein had been firing at.

"Feel the weight of it, Nephew. Imagine what this could do to a person's body. For centuries, the West and the Jews have tried to keep our people from worshipping Allah, the true God. You've learned about the Crusades in school, haven't you?"

Hakeem quickly nodded as he slipped the chain over his head. The cartridge was still warm from being kept against his uncle's chest.

"You know I'm not a very religious man, Hakeem, but I can read the times. Soon, because of their hatred of Allah, the Great Satan will come to try to destroy our country. But we don't fear, because Saddam will defend us. The mighty Republican Guard will defend us. Allah will defend us. And someday, our great leader may call on you to pick up a gun for him and fight against the West and defend his honor. Could you do it? Will you be ready, little Hakeem?"

Even now, as he fingered the long, narrow brass bullet hanging around his neck, thinking about how Uncle Ali's prophecy about the Great Satan coming to their land had been fulfilled only two weeks later, his own answer repeated itself in his mind. *I will be ready, Uncle Ali. I will fight for our leader. I will fight for our honor. I will fight the Great Satan! Allahu akbar!*

Suddenly, an ancient, peeling soccer ball bounced off the side of his head. "Nice reflexes, Cheetah," Ziad laughed. "What are you daydreaming about?"

"I was just thinking about Uncle Ali."

"I don't like to think about him. He scares me. People say he's friends with Uday. Could that be?"

"I don't know, Ziad. I think it's best not to ask too many questions."

"Yeah . . . I hope he leaves my mom alone tonight. I don't like the things he says to her or the way he looks at her."

Ziad was the son of Uncle Shakir, the second of the three brothers. When Shakir was killed three years ago while fighting in Iran, Hakeem's father had brought his brother's family—Aunt Shatha, Ziad, and Ziad's four-year-old sister, Zenab—into his own house.

The voice of Ziad's mother rang out from across the dirt field, interrupting their thoughts. It was almost time for *Maghrib*, the sunset prayer time.

"You realize that this will be the site of your great humiliation," Ziad taunted in the pompous language they used when teasing each other.

"Tomorrow, Ziad, your pride will be shown to be as empty as your mother's purse!"

That struck a little too close to home for Ziad, and he pounced upon Hakeem, quickly taking him to the ground. The boys laughed and wrestled, until the voice of Aunt Shatha came a second time—this time with a little more force and the addition of the word *Now!*

"We better get going. The field will still be here tomorrow," Ziad said. "I'll race you. Last one home's a goat kisser!"

"You got it! Ready . . . set . . ."

Ziad's forearm swung up, catching Hakeem right under the chin.

I fall for that every time, Hakeem thought as he dropped to the ground.

"Go!" Ziad yelled, bolting off to take full advantage of the lead he had just given himself.

Hakeem sat in the dirt for a few seconds, counting his teeth with his tongue. He was in no rush. He knew that no matter how

large a lead Ziad created for himself, his cousin had no chance of winning. Hakeem would run him down, and then tomorrow he would make him pay on the soccer field for the cheap shot.

As he got up, he spotted his nemesis. Ziad was about halfway home, puffing with all his might. Beyond his cousin, Hakeem could see his mother and Aunt Shatha laughing and cheering Ziad on. Reclining on the roof were his father and Uncle Ali, shaking their heads and grinning. *Here's my chance to show Uncle Ali what his "little" Hakeem is made of.* Hakeem jumped up and began running at full speed.

Suddenly, the world became a ball of fire. The concussive wave knocked Hakeem off his feet. He lay flat on his back. Flames singed his entire body.

The first thing that entered his mind as he glanced around was *Look at all these rocks we'll have to clear off the field tomorrow.* The high-pitched ringing in his head was making it hard to think. As he slowly got up, a pungent smell hit his nose—a mixture of smoke, dust, and . . . what was that last smell? . . . Burnt hair?

What happened? Where is everybody? Ziad was running home . . . Mother and Aunt Shatha were at the door . . . and Father and Uncle Ali were on the roof. Hakeem looked around, trying to make sense of things and attempting to get a bearing on which way was home, but the dirt and grit in his eyes were making them water. Everything was a blur.

When he finally figured out which direction was home, he saw no roof, no door, no house, no Father, no Mother, no Uncle Ali, no Aunt Shatha, no Ziad. He saw smoke and dirt, fire and rubble. Hakeem stumbled toward where his home had been. He could only think of one thing: *Mama!* Now he began to feel the burns on his face, starting with a tingling and quickly growing to a fire.

Panic began to well up inside of him. *Mama, where are you?* Hakeem tried to call out for her, but all the heat, dust, and smoke had reduced his voice to a congested croak.

The ringing in his head began to subside, only to be replaced by a more terrifying sound—screams. Screams coming from all around him. Screams coming from within him.

People were running on his left and on his right—some carrying buckets, some covering wounds. Hakeem stumbled past a smoldering heap of rags that deep inside he knew was his cousin, but

he couldn't stop—couldn't deal with that now. He had to find his mother. *Mama, I'm almost there!*

As he crossed his father's property line, he fell into a deep, wide hole. An exposed piece of rebar cut a long gash into his leg. Blood poured out, soaking his torn pants, but still he forced himself up.

Mama, I'll find you! Oh, Allah, help me! Allahu akbar, you are great! Show me where she is! Don't worry, Mama, I'll save you!

He grasped for handholds to pull himself out of the hole and felt something solid. He grabbed it and began climbing up the side of the crater. As he reached the top, he finally saw what he was holding on to. It was an arm—visible to halfway up the bicep before it disappeared underneath a massive block of cement and metal.

Hakeem instantly let go, falling back to the bottom. He twisted and landed on his hands and knees and began to vomit. As he hovered over the newly formed puddle, he could hear the screams all around him. He dropped to his side and rolled onto his back, closing his eyes tightly, trying to will himself not to look at the arm. As long as he didn't look up, didn't see the very familiar ring around the third finger of the hand, then maybe it wouldn't be true. Maybe he could just stay down here, and eventually his mother would find him. She would help him out of the pit, put ointment on his face, bandage his leg, hold him tight, and tell him everything was going to be okay.

But Hakeem knew that would never happen. He knew Mama would never hold him again. The distinctive ring he had glimpsed was one he had examined often as he listened to stories while lying in bed. It was a ring he had spun around his mother's finger as he sat with the women and children in the mosque, listening to the mullah condemn America and the Jews.

This has to be a dream, he thought. Please, Allah, let me wake up! Tears began and quickly turned into torrents. I don't like this anymore; please let me wake up! His heart felt like it would explode. He didn't know what to do. Somebody help me! Anybody help me!! He didn't want to look back up at the hand. He didn't know how to get out of the hole. He didn't know how he would stop the bleeding on his leg. He didn't know if he would ever stop crying. Oh, Allah, please help me!

Now his screams began again, and they continued on and on until finally Hakeem's world faded into an unsettled blackness.

2003

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

BAGRAM VALLEY

HELMAND PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN

His count was off. Second Lieutenant Riley Covington of the United States Air Force Special Operations Command was on watch at a perimeter security post. He had been lying at the top of a low rise, watching his sector, for four hours, and each time he had counted the boulders on the hill across the small valley, he had come up with thirty-six. This time, however, the count reached thirty-seven. *Keep it together, buddy*, Riley thought as he rubbed his eyes. He shifted slightly to try to allow the point of a rock that had been boring into his left leg to begin a new hole. *I have no doubt these guys scattered these rocks out here 'cause they knew we were coming.*

"You seeing anything, Taps?" Riley whispered into his comm. At the other security post, located on the opposite side of the harbor site, Airman First Class Armando Tapia was stretched out behind a small, hastily constructed rock wall.

"Everything's good to go," came the reply.

On this sixth night of their mission, Riley had chosen a less-than-ideal position to set up their camp. He didn't feel too bad, however; there were probably fewer than a half dozen ideal sites in this whole desolate valley. He was positioned on a low hill to the east of his Operational Detachment Alpha, and Tapia was planted to the north of the team. Rising on the south and west of the ODA camp were steep cliffs. If anyone wanted to approach their bivouac, they would have to come through one of the two security posts.

Typically, AFSOC missions were carried out singly or in pairs. The special-ops personnel were dropped in from high altitude to take meteorologic and geographic measurements, then silently evacuated. Very clean, very quiet. But Riley's team had lost three members in this area during the last two weeks. So it was on to plan B—take in a group and protect everyone's backside.

The moon exposed the barren landscape, eliminating the need for vision enhancement. Riley shifted again and flexed his fingers to keep the cool night air from cramping them. A scorpion skittered up to check out the rustle. Riley's number-two man, Staff Sergeant Scott Ross, said these creatures were called *orthochirus afghanus Kovarik*; Riley preferred to call them the "nasty little black ones." A well-placed flick sent the arachnid careering down the front side of the hill. *Time to start counting boulders again.*

Riley Covington knew that if he could survive this tour in Afghanistan, chances were good that by this time next year, the scenery around him would look a whole lot better. He was two years out of the Air Force Academy, where he had been a three-time WAC/MWC Defensive Player of the Year and, as a senior, had won the Butkus Award as the nation's top linebacker. He was six-two, rock hard, and lightning fast. His nickname at the Academy had been Apache—later shortened to "Pach"—after the AH-64 attack helicopter. *Hit 'em low, hit 'em hard, hit 'em fast!* Riley had sent more opposing players staggering to the sidelines than he could count. Once, a writer for the *Rocky Mountain News* had compared his hitting ability to Mike Singletary's, the infamous linebacker who had broken sixteen helmets during his college days at Baylor. He still felt proud when he thought about that comparison.

Two years earlier, Riley had been selected by the Colorado Mustangs in the third round of the Pro Football League draft, and commentators believed Riley had the possibility of a promising PFL career ahead of him. However, his post-Academy commitment meant putting that opportunity off for a couple of years. In the meantime, he had spent his last two thirty-day leaves in Mustangs training camps before rushing back out to wherever AFSOC wanted him next.

Riley's insides tensed as he came to the end of his count. *Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six . . . thirty-seven . . . thirty-eight! Something is definitely happening here,* he thought.

WHOOMPF! The unmistakable sound of a mortar tube echoed through the valley below.

"Incoming!" Riley yelled as he opened fire with his M4 carbine at "boulders" thirty-seven and thirty-eight, causing one to stumble back down the hill and the other to remain permanently where it was.

A flare lit up the night sky as heavy machine-gun fire, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms rounds targeted Riley's ODA. Riley looked to his left and saw an anticoalition militia approaching from the north, right over Tapia's position. Riley, seeing the size of the enemy force, let off a few more three-shot bursts, then bolted back down to the harbor site.

He took cover in a low ditch and scanned the camp. What he saw was not encouraging. Four of his ODA members were down—two with what looked like some pretty major shrapnel wounds. There was no sign of Tapia anywhere. The rest of his squad was scattered around the camp, pinned under the heavy barrage. One of their patrol Humvees had been hit with an RPG, and the large quantity of ammunition inside was cooking off. This situation was spiraling downward fast.

Movement caught his eye. It was Scott Ross, lying flat behind some empty petrol cans and waving to catch Riley's attention. Using hand signals, Ross indicated that his com was down and pointed back toward the second patrol vehicle.

Riley looked in the direction Ross was pointing and saw their salvation. Off to his left, about fifteen meters away, an MK19 automatic grenade launcher was mounted on its low tripod. Riley quickly signaled back to Ross to provide full-automatic cover fire, then rocketed out from safety and across the dirt. He almost made it. Something hit him in the hip, spinning him counterclockwise in midair.

He landed hard, gasping for air. As he tried to get up, a mixture of stinging and deep, throbbing pain dropped him down flat. He knew his men desperately needed him, but he couldn't move. Helplessness quickly overwhelmed him. *Lord, I can't stay down, but I don't know if I can get up! Give me what I need! Please, give me what I need!*

Ross was shouting at him, but the surrounding noise made it impossible for Riley to make out the words. Without the Mark 19, their chances were bleak.

Mustering all the strength he had left, Riley began pulling himself the rest of the way to the weapon. Bullets danced all around him, kicking up puffs of dirt into his face and clanging against the nearby Humvee. With each grab of the rocky ground, his adrenaline increased. Finally, the endorphins began to get the best of the pain,

and Riley was able to get his feet under him. He stumbled forward, launched himself behind the Mark 19, and let loose.

It took him just under a minute and a half to empty the ammunition can of sixty grenades. The sound was deafening, and the explosions from the shells hitting the enemy positions lit up the night. Riley knew from experience that there was nothing to do but fall back in the face of that kind of fire, which was exactly what the enemy militia did. But RPGs and mortar rounds kept dropping into the camp.

Riley signaled for Ross to come and load another can of ammo on the Mark 19. Then he half ran, half staggered over to what remained of his ODA. The rest of his team huddled around him and he took a quick head count. Besides Ross, there were Dawkins, Logan, Murphy, Posada, and Li. *Not good*. They would be outnumbered if a second wave came.

“Posada, contact the command-and-control nodes in the rear and request immediate close air support and a medical-evacuation flight.”

“Yes, sir!”

Riley drew his team close. “Okay, men, we have two options. We dig in here and try to hold off another attack, or we surprise them while they’re regrouping.”

“Tell ya what, Pach,” said Kim “Tommy” Li, a man with an itchy trigger finger and way too many tattoos, “if there’s gonna be target practice going on here, I’d rather be the shooter than the bull’s-eye.”

Riley laid out his plan. “Okay, then, here’s how it’s going to work: I’m guessing they’ll feint another attack from the north, but their main force will come from the east, because that’s where the Mark 19 is. They know that if they don’t take the Mark out, they’re toast. So, Murphy and Li, I want you to belly out to those boulders twenty meters north to meet their feint. Logan, you and Ross remount the Mark on the Humvee and get her ready to go head-to-head with their onrush. Dawkins, you and I’ll hit the east security post. When you all hear us start firing, circle the Humvee around east; then everyone open up with everything and blow the snot out of these desert rats. Got it?”

An excited mixture of “Yes, sir” and “Yeah, boy” was heard from the men.

“Excellent! Posada, sweeten up our coordinates with command.”

“You got it, Pach,” Posada said as he pounded away on his Toughbook—a nearly indestructible laptop computer perfect for use in combat.

“We’ve got five of our guys down, with at least one probably out—that’s unacceptable. Let’s make ‘em pay.” Riley locked eyes with each member of his team and tried to draw from them the same courage he was attempting to instill. “Dawkins, don’t wait for me to hit that security post with you! Ready . . . go, go, go!”

Skeeter Dawkins was a good old boy from Mississippi. Fiercely loyal to Riley, there were several times when he had to be pulled off of fellow team members who he thought had disrespected their lieutenant. He was big, strong, fast, and knew only two words when under fire: *Yes* and *sir*.

Dawkins ran out ahead and was already in position by the time Riley got there and dropped next to him with a grunt of pain. Sixty meters out, Riley could see between forty and fifty well-armed enemy militia members prepping for another attack. “I’m guessing they’re not done with us yet, Skeet.”

“Yes, sir.” It sounded more like *Yeah, zir*.

“Looks like they’ll be feinting inside while rolling a flank around left. Must be boring being so predictable.”

“Yes, sir.”

The two men lay silently for a minute, watching the preparations of their enemies. Riley turned to look at the empty sky behind them. “Sure would like to see that air support come in right about now.”

“Mmm.”

“Skeet, anyone ever tell you that you ain’t much of a conversationalist?” It was hard not to slip into a Mississippi drawl when talking with Skeeter.

Skeeter grinned. “Yes, sir.”

The random actions of the enemy force suddenly coalesced into an organized forward movement.

“Looks like the Afghani welcome wagon’s rolling again.”

"Yes, sir."

"Skeeter Dawkins, you gonna let any of those boys through here?"

Skeeter turned to Riley. He looked genuinely hurt at his lieutenant's attempt to force an expansion of his vocabulary.

Riley laughed. Nothing like feigned confidence to hide what you're really feeling. "Don't you worry, airman. Just make sure you give them a gen-u-ine Mississippi welcome."

Skeeter smiled. "Yes, sir!"

Riley could hear the muffled sound of the Humvee starting up as he and Skeeter readied their M4s. Red dots from each of their M68 Close Combat Optics landed nose level on the first two attackers. Their fingers hugged the triggers.

The sudden whine of two Apache helicopters halted Riley's counterattack. The 30 mm cannons mounted on either side of the choppers strafed the enemy force. The ensuing carnage was hard to watch. One life after another was snuffed out in rapid succession.

When the last bad guy stopped moving, the Apaches turned and headed back to where they'd come from. Skeeter pulled Riley to his feet and helped him down the hill. Pain crashed through Riley's hip, and his left leg buckled. Kim Li rushed over and slipped himself under Riley's other arm.

"Well, Pach, it was a good plan," Li laughed. "Guess I'll have to take my target practice elsewhere."

Riley knew it was just Li's adrenaline talking, but he still had a hard time not laying into him. Too much blood had been spilled and too many screams filled the night air to be joking about killing just now.

Back at the harbor site, an MH-53 Pave Low was just dropping in to evacuate the team. Riley was eased onto a stretcher and carried the rest of the way. As he was lifted onto the helicopter with the two dead and five injured, football was the furthest thing from his mind.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19
PARKER, COLORADO

Riley Covington's hand shot out, clicking the alarm to Off just before the numbers shifted to 5:30 a.m. This was a game Riley played against the clock every morning, trying to wake up as close as he could to his alarm time without having to hear the obnoxious chirp. He was pretty good at it too. His days at the United States Air Force Academy had ingrained in him a sense of time that most people would find borderline compulsive.

He tossed his down comforter off and slowly swung his body out of bed, feeling the cold hardwood floor under his feet. The firmness of his mattress could be manually adjusted, and for the two days after each game, his bumps and bruises forced him to put the setting at "way soft."

Moving to the window, he pulled the drapes back, and instantly the room filled with white light. The sun wasn't up yet, but the reflection of the moon on the fresh snow made Riley squint. *Why would anyone want to live anywhere else?* he mused. He had always loved the Colorado winter—the frost on the windows, the muted sounds caused by a blanket of snow, the feel of a cold house in the morning while you're still warm under the blankets.

CHAPTER

ONE

Feeling invigorated, he padded into the kitchen, flicked on Fox News, and began to assemble the ingredients for his daily breakfast shake—a simple concoction of protein powder, soy milk, whey, and frozen berries. As the blender whirred to life, Riley read the crawl at the bottom of the television screen.

HOMICIDE BOMBER IN NETANYA, ISRAEL, KILLS FOUR AND WOUNDS SEVENTEEN.

Riley's anger flashed. This was the fifth bombing in the past two weeks. What was the matter with these people? Didn't they care whom they killed? Didn't they know that these women and children had nothing to do with their war?

As he stewed on this, his mind drifted back to a conversation he'd had with Tim Clayton, the senior pastor of Parker Hills Community Church, his home church when he could attend.

"I'm sick and tired of hearing people say we need to have compassion for these murderers and understand their belief system," Riley had said the day a Palestinian bomber had killed fourteen people on a bus in Haifa.

"No one can make you love anyone, Riley," Pastor Tim countered. "But keep in mind that these people are caught up in one of the greatest lies ever perpetrated on mankind—the lie that it is worth killing others for your beliefs. These people need our prayers, they need our pity, and they need the power of our nation to try to stop them before they throw their lives away like this."

"I'm with you on your last point," Riley responded. "They need to feel a serious U.S. smackdown. But, Tim, you haven't seen what I've seen. You haven't seen your buddies lying in pieces in front of you. You haven't seen the children mangled by the screws and ball bearings from some terrorist wacko's bomb. I'm sorry, but pity's something I really have a hard time with right now."

"I understand," Tim had said gently. "Maybe because I haven't seen it, I can keep more of an objective viewpoint. I just know that the moment after these men—and women now—detonate their bombs, they've got a huge surprise waiting for them."

Riley's brain knew Tim was right. Convincing his heart was a different matter. *I gotta mull this over a different time. I've got work to do.*

He chugged the purple liquid right out of the blender—no use dirtying a glass—then moved back through the bedroom and into the bathroom, where he cranked the shower to full blast. Fifteen minutes steaming up the glass stall would work out the kinks in his body and leave him ready to start another day.

Riley felt great, especially for fourteen weeks into a PFL season as a starting linebacker. He had always taken care of himself physically—even as a cadet at the Academy—and it paid off this late in the season. While other guys' bodies were starting to break down, he was still at the top of his game. He knew that he was living an American dream—a dream that could disappear with one good hit or one wrong step—so he did everything he could to make the best of it.



After his role in Operation Enduring Freedom, Riley had been unsure what would be next for him. He could have had a very promising career as an officer in AFSOC. He knew how to lead men and was able to garner their respect through his example. Besides that, the military was in his blood. His father had been a navy man in Vietnam, and his grandfather had flown an F-86 in Korea, chalking up seven MiGs to his credit. Riley's choice to try for the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs rather than the Naval Academy in Annapolis had led to all sorts of good-natured ribbing of his dad by his grandpa. Holidays with the family had never been the same again.

Although he knew the military was an honorable profession, Riley still had that Pro Football League dream. He'd been on leave on draft day, and he could still feel the incredible tension he experienced while sitting in his parents' living room. The talk on ESPN was whether any team would pick this year's Butkus Award winner, since, like all Academy graduates, he had a five-year military commitment hanging over his head. As the picks progressed, it was hard for him not to get disheartened.

All the pundits said Riley had the skills to be a first rounder, but he'd begun to wonder if the specter of mandatory military service was just too much for most PFL teams. Riley's dad kept feeding him words of encouragement, and his mom kept feeding him lemon

pound cake. Half a day and three-quarters of a cake later, he finally heard his name called in the third round. The cheers in the Draft Central auditorium could only be matched by the screams in that little house. To be chosen in the PFL draft and to be chosen by the Colorado Mustangs—what could be better than that?

The selection had been a definite risk for the organization, but they felt it was worth it if they could bag someone with Riley's playing potential. Of course, both Riley and the team would have to wait. Riley had no problem with serving out his commitment. He was more than willing to fight for his country—die for it if necessary.

And he had come fairly close to doing just that. The bullet he had taken during the firefight back in the Bagram Valley in Afghanistan had entered just above his hip. It had chipped a bone and caused a lot of bleeding, but thanks to the quick medical evacuation and the incredible medical team at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, the only lingering issue he had was a dull ache when the weather turned.

After returning from Germany, Riley had been called to his commanding officer's desk. The CO had looked up directly at Riley. "Covington, I brought you in here to make you an offer I hope you won't take. The higher-ups want me to give you the ludicrous choice of opting out of the rest of your full-time service commitment to the United States Air Force so you can go play in the Pro Football League. You'd stay in the reserves, and we'd have you in the off-season until your time's up. Now, I've seen you lead men, and I've seen you save lives. I think it would be a shame for you to give up the chance to make a lasting difference for this country so that you could go play some kids' game. But, hey, that's the choice I'm told I have to offer you. You've got twenty-four hours. Dismissed."

Riley had struggled with the choice as he walked back down the willow-lined street to his quarters. A lot of what his CO had said was right. Would choosing the PFL be taking the easier and less meaningful way out? But he could still make a difference in many people's lives playing football, right? And he certainly wouldn't be the first guy to follow such a path.

The precedent for a professional athlete opting out of military obligations had been set after the first Gulf War. Chad Hennings

had returned a war hero after having flown A-10 Warthogs during the liberation of Kuwait. Although he had a long commitment still awaiting him, the air force believed he would serve them better in a public-relations role. It turned out to be a great decision; Chad had taken the opportunity to help lead his football team to three championships during the nineties.

Once the door was opened, others had stepped through. Steve Russ and Chris Gizzi both served full-time for a couple of years after the Academy, then completed the bulk of their service in the reserves during the summers while spending most of the year playing professional ball.

Riley wrestled with the decision through the night. He had made a commitment to the air force, and he did not take that lightly. The guys of his squad depended on his leadership, yet to a man they told him he would be a complete idiot not to jump at this opportunity. Still, he held back.

Finally, early the next morning, a three-way call had come from his dad and grandpa.

“God has given you the abilities and the opportunity to do something that few people have a chance to do,” Grandpa Covington had said. “Obviously, He’s got something special in mind for you.”

“Riles,” his dad said, “you know that whatever decision you make, we’ll be proud of you. We’re much more concerned about who you are than what you do.”

By the time Riley hung up the phone, it was like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He finally felt free to pursue his dream. Why it was so important to get the go-ahead from these two men, he couldn’t say. Maybe he wanted their affirmation, maybe he wanted their wisdom, or maybe it was just plain old respect for their opinion. All he knew was that their words were the key that opened the door to his PFL career. Six months later, he said his final good-byes to full-time air force life.

Riley chuckled to himself as he thought about the final party his squad had thrown for him before he left AFSOC. He had never seen so much alcohol in his life. While he nursed his Diet Coke, his guys gave speeches that became more syrupy and less coherent as the night wore on. Skeeter Dawkins gave him a tribute that stretched

out for a record eighteen words, and Kim Li actually cried during his fourth toast of the evening. The party had officially ended with last call at 2 a.m., but Riley had spent until four thirty driving his men home.

Two weeks after that, he was running onto the Mustangs' practice field at the Inverness Training Center.

////////////////////

Riley shut off the water and climbed out of the shower.

As he got dressed, he glanced over at the Purple Heart and Silver Star his mom had framed for him and insisted he keep hanging in his home. This wall was the most out-of-the-way place that Riley could hang them while still honoring his mom's request. Riley Covington had been called a hero, but he was uncomfortable with that label. He had simply carried out his mission the way he'd been trained—nothing more, nothing less. It was his duty as an officer in the United States Air Force. Riley had acted as the natural-born leader he was, and now he hoped to use that leadership to take his team into the play-offs.

He went out into the garage and hopped into the black Denali he had bought used from one of the defensive ends who didn't make the cut last year. As he backed the truck out, the tires crunching through new snow, he thought about the next two weeks. The team had started out the season slowly, but they were charging hard at the end, winning seven out of the last eight games. If they could win these last two games, they were assured a wild card berth.

Riley was quickly becoming one of the key leaders of the defensive squad. The other guys were watching him, both on and off the field, and he knew he had to set the example for passion and hard work. He had no doubt that he was up for the challenge. *Let them see your focus. Let them see your work ethic. Let them see your integrity. Be the first on the field and the last off.*

Ultimately, it wasn't that different from his role as a second lieutenant.

Dear Reader,

Lots of people have asked me how I made the jump from football to fiction. It's a fair question!

The genesis of *Monday Night Jihad* goes back about ten years to when my brother started keeping a journal of all the football stories I told. He always tried to talk me into writing a book, but for a long time it wasn't something that interested me. Then about a year and a half ago, I began to think about the possibility of incorporating a military/terrorist element with all of my own football experiences. My goal was to give readers a great story full of action, adventure, a little bit of romance, and of course, football.

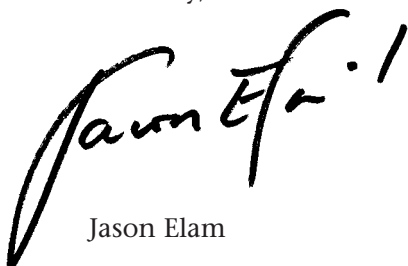
After having lengthy discussions with my pastor, Rick Yohn, about the concept, I remember asking God to show me whether or not this was something He would like me to pursue. Eventually I became convinced to go forward. My desire in writing this book was—and still is—to contrast the more radical elements of Islam with what I view as *true* Christianity.

Many have attempted to distort the Jesus of the Bible, and so my hope and prayer is to honor the *real* Jesus. Second Corinthians 11:4 speaks of people who preach about a Jesus who is “different” from the true Son of God. My hope is that

through this story each reader sees Jesus Christ for who He *is*—the eternal God who created all things. He is the God-man who took on human form to bring us hope. He is the one who allowed Himself to be the perfect sacrifice for us all. He is the one who suffered a brutal death on a Roman cross. He is the one who physically rose up from the grave. He is the one who now indwells all believers. He is the one who will return to take those who believe in Him to be with Him for all eternity. It is to this Jesus that I dedicate this book.

Thanks for taking the time to read *Monday Night Jihad*; I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as Steve and I have enjoyed working on it. Be looking for our next Riley Covington thriller, due in stores in early 2009!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Elam". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and a distinct "E".

Jason Elam

JASON ELAM was born in Ft. Walton Beach, Florida, and grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1988, Jason received a full football scholarship to the University of Hawaii, where he played for four years, earning academic All-America and Kodak All-America honors. He graduated in 1992 with a BS in communications and was drafted in the third round of the 1993 NFL draft by the Denver Broncos.

In 1997 and 1998, Jason won two back-to-back World Championships with the Broncos and was selected to participate in the Pro Bowl in 1995, 1998, and 2001. He is currently working on an MA in global apologetics at Liberty Theological Seminary and has an abiding interest in Middle East affairs, the study of Scripture, and defending the Christian faith. Jason is a licensed commercial airplane pilot and lives in Denver, Colorado, with his wife, Tamy, and their family.

STEVE YOHN grew up as a pastor's kid in Fresno, California, and both of those facts contributed significantly to his slightly warped perspective on life. Steve graduated from Multnomah Bible College with a BS in biblical studies while barely surviving a stint as a youth pastor.

While studying at Denver Seminary, Steve worked as a videographer for Youth for Christ

International, traveling throughout the world to capture the ministry's global impact. In 1997, he joined the staff of Fellowship Community Church and is now the director of adult ministries, a job that allows him ample opportunity to indulge two of his great passions—speaking and mentoring.

Surprisingly, although his hobbies are reading classic literature, translating the New Testament from Greek, and maintaining a list of the political leaders of every country worldwide over the last twenty-five years, he still occasionally gets invited to parties and has a few friends. His wife, Nancy, and their daughter are the joys of his life.