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White Lies

Written by Stephen Leather

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**STEPHEN
LEATHER
WHITE LIES**


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For Marie

The instructor's name was Hammad. He was thirty-seven years old, a former captain in the Afghan National Army, and a jihad warrior who believed with all his heart that his mission in life was to kill those who did not agree that Allah was the only God and that Muhammad was his prophet. Hammad knew the Qur'an by heart and his favourite verse was 'I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them'.

Hammad fervently believed that Muslims who didn't join the fight against the infidel were hypocrites that Allah would surely send to Hell. He had joined the Taliban as a teenager and six years later had cheered and praised Allah when the Twin Towers had been attacked and destroyed. Like many of his compatriots he had gone to ground when the Americans had invaded Afghanistan, dumping his weapons and passing as a struggling farmer until the Americans had decided to rebuild the Afghan army. Hammad had joined using a false name and had been trained by the Third Special Forces Group in a Soviet-built camp on the eastern side of Kabul. In 2004 he was promoted to captain and three months later he left his barracks with an M-16 and half a dozen grenades and killed three Americans and twenty-three

Afghan soldiers before disappearing over the border into the badlands of Pakistan.

He was a short, stocky man, his skin dark brown and leathery from a lifetime lived mainly outdoors. There was a jagged scar on his left cheek, a hearing aid in his left ear and he was missing two fingers on his left hand, the result of an improvised IED exploding prematurely. He was wearing a grey salwar kameez – a long shirt over baggy trousers that flapped in the wind and stirred up the dust around his sandals. On the table in front of him was a ground-to-air missile and standing around him were six men, all in their twenties, who were hanging on his every word. They had been up since dawn. After a breakfast of circular sweet flatbreads, dried apricots, yogurt and green tea flavoured with cardamom, the men had been taken for a two-kilometre run followed by an hour of physical exercises and unarmed combat training.

Three of them were wearing salwar kameez and one was wearing an ankle-length thawb of rough cotton. The other two wore combat trousers, T-shirts and Nike trainers. There was no dress code at the training camp, it was the quality of the men that mattered, not their clothing. At just before midday they had all retreated to a goatherd's cottage. An American spy satellite was due to pass overhead and would be photographing the area for at least twenty minutes before it passed out of range. Hammad had a notebook that contained the dates and times that satellites passed overhead and several times each day training had to be interrupted. There was now a five-hour window before the next satellite was due and Hammad planned to use the time to introduce the young jihadists to the ground-to-air-missile that was

central to al-Qaeda's plan to unleash havoc in the United Kingdom.

The missile had been delivered in the back of an old pick-up truck, packed in a wooden crate. Now it sat on a wooden trestle table. It was a practice model, coloured blue. The live version was green, but it would be some time before the jihadists would be shown the real thing. It was a little over five feet long, the firing unit at the front with most of the barrel behind it. Hammad let the jihadists stare at the weapon for more than a minute. One of them, overweight and dark skinned, said something to the man on his left. The other man laughed and replied but Hammad had no idea what they were saying. They both had Bangladeshi parents but had been born in Glasgow and had accents so impenetrable that whenever possible he tried to avoid talking to them. They were both wearing ill-fitting salwar kameez. The fat one – his name was Sami – had a knitted Muslim cap on his head, and his chest strained at the material of his shirt. The other, Labib, was always pulling up his trousers as if he feared they were about to drop around his knees.

Labib reached out to touch the missile but then pulled his hand back as if he feared it would somehow hurt him. Hammad smiled. 'The weapon is called an Igla, and has the designation 9K38. You are never to refer to it that way. In all communication it is to be called "the parcel". That applies not only to phone and email conversations, but even when you think you are talking to a brother in a secure location. Do you all understand that?'

The six men nodded. One of them raised a hand to ask a question. His name was Rafiq, a British-born Pakistani

who had proved himself an enthusiastic and diligent student. He was one of the men wearing Western clothing. The men who ran the training camp had high hopes for Rafiq, and the other jihadist who had come from Bradford, a twenty-year-old mechanic called Naseem. Like Rafiq, Naseem dressed in Western clothing and was of Pakistani heritage. Naseem was clean shaven but Rafiq had a thick, neatly trimmed beard.

‘Why is it blue?’ asked Rafiq.

‘It is a practice model, it cannot be fired and there is no warhead,’ said Hammad. ‘We will be using this practice model so that you can familiarise yourself with the components. Tomorrow you will be shown a working version and eventually we will be conducting live firings.’

‘Will we be shooting at a plane?’ asked Naseem.

‘Let’s leave the questions until the end,’ said Hammad. ‘Now, you will hear it called by several names. The Russians call it Igla, which means needle. The Americans call it the Grouse. There is an earlier version the Americans call Gimlet. And a new version, introduced to the Russian army in 2004, is called the Grinch by the Americans. The versions we have are all the Igla. You train on this and when we are ready, you will be firing one.’

‘Wicked,’ said one of the Birmingham men. He was known as ‘KC’ or ‘Casey’, Hammad wasn’t sure which. His parents were Kenyan but KC had been born in England and had a strong Birmingham accent. In contrast to his problems with the Glaswegians, though, Hammad had no trouble understanding KC. KC was enthusiastic, perhaps too much so. He was the fittest of the group, and a fast runner, but he tended to speak without thinking, and while there was no

doubting his devotion to Islam he was not a good student of the Qur'an.

Hammad's jaw tensed and he gave KC a hard look but didn't say anything. KC looked away, realising his mistake. 'Sorry,' he muttered under his breath.

Hammad made a soft snorting sound through his nose as he stared at KC, then addressed the group again. 'This version of the Igla has been around for more than thirty years, and is tried and tested,' he said. 'It has a probability-of-kill ratio of between 0.3 and 0.5 against unprotected moving targets. That means that when fired at a fast-moving plane, the missile will miss at least half the time. That ratio falls to one-in-four if the target is able to employ countermeasures.'

Rafiq frowned. 'You mean, most of the time it misses its target?'

'When fired at military jets or helicopters, yes,' said Hammad. 'But at static targets, it is much more accurate. Also, planes landing or taking off are much easier to hit.' He smiled. 'Sitting ducks, as they say.'

He ran his finger down the barrel. 'There is a lot of technical information that you don't really need to know, but I will run through it with you now,' he said. 'The missile has an operational range of a little more than three miles and can hit planes as high as eleven thousand feet after travelling at twice the speed of sound. Once fired the missile heads for the heat signature of the target, usually an engine. The missile uses a two-colour infrared guidance system which improves accuracy. The missile is designed to alter its course at the last second so that it hits the fuselage rather than the engine, which is guaranteed to do more damage. The warhead weighs two and a half pounds but the missile also incorporates a

delayed-impact fuse and an extra charge that ignites any remaining fuel.' He smiled. 'One direct hit is virtually guaranteed to destroy a 747 or any other passenger jet.' He patted the tube. 'It has an optional friend-or-foe system so that it cannot accidentally shoot a friendly plane.' His smile widened. 'Not that we will be needing that function, of course.' Several of the men chuckled. 'The missile system is also equipped to combat infrared countermeasures and to minimise the effect of decoy flares and jammers, though generally such things are not fitted to passenger aircraft.'

'Will that be our target, back in England?' asked Rafiq.

Hammad looked at him for several seconds before replying. 'Your targets will be given to you nearer the time,' he said. 'All you need to concern yourself with now is how to use the equipment.'

'Sure,' said Rafiq. 'It's just that you keep talking about planes. I thought . . .' He left the sentence unfinished and looked away.

'Brother, you are a jihad warrior, there is no need for you to think,' said Hammad. 'The thinking will be done for you so that you can best serve Allah. Plans are being laid and you will play your part. That is what this training is about, to prepare you so that you can fulfil your role.'

'I understand,' said Rafiq.

Hammad surveyed the group. 'I realise that you all have questions, that you all want to know what lies ahead.' He put his hand over his heart. 'Brothers, I too would like to know the future, but my part is to train you, nothing more and nothing less. That is my role and I will do what is asked of me. You in turn have your roles to play. It is as if we are all pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle. As individual pieces none

of us can see the complete picture, but I can assure you it will be glorious.'

The men gathered around him nodded.

'*Allahu akbar*,' said Rafiq. 'God is great.'

'*Allahu akbar*,' said Hammad.

'*Allahu akbar*,' repeated the others, in unison.

Hammad bent over the missile and waved his hand over it. 'The system comes in four parts,' he said. 'There is a ground power supply source, a launching tube, the launching mechanism and the missile itself. I shall explain to you first how to aim the weapon, then we shall practise.'

A small transceiver on the table burst into life and Hammad picked it up. It was one of the spotters in the hills to the west. 'A bird is on the wing,' said the spotter. 'With twenty feathers.'

'Understood,' said Hammad. He slid the transceiver inside his man-dress. 'There is a drone on its way, brothers. Coming this way at twenty thousand feet. Help me take everything inside.'

Hammad picked up the missile launcher and took it over to the goatherd's cottage. Rafiq picked up one end of the table. One of the Somalians – a lanky six-footer called Asad – took the other end and together they carried it over to the cottage. KC grabbed the whiteboard and hurried after them.

The cottage stank of goats. There was a bare concrete floor and the walls were made of clay bricks that had been covered with a layer of brown plaster. The ceiling was flat planks of wood with earth piled up on top.

Hammad sat down cross-legged and motioned for the men to do the same. The transceiver crackled again. 'The bird with twenty feathers is flying east.'

'Is it a Predator?' asked Rafiq. The Predator was one of the most feared American unmanned aircraft. It was usually fitted with two Hellfire missiles with more than enough firepower to destroy the cottage they were huddled in. The United States Air Force operated most of the Predators in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the CIA had also been flying them across the border to attack targets in Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas.

'If it was a Predator, the spotter would say eagle, not bird,' said Hammad. 'Bird means it is a surveillance drone. It is nothing to worry about, the Americans fly them over the border all the time. We simply have to wait until it passes and then we can continue. You are from Bradford?'

Rafiq nodded. 'I was studying to be a dentist.' He smiled. 'I suppose I still am. I've got another year to go.'

'It is a good profession,' said Hammad. 'My uncle, he is a dentist. So which team do you support?'

'Team?'

'Football. I support Chelsea. Chelsea are a great team.'

Rafiq smiled. 'Arsenal,' he said, scratching his beard.

'Arsenal? You're from Bradford.'

'Bradford are shit,' said Rafiq. 'My dad was an Arsenal fan. Don't ask me why.'

The others began to shout out the names of their favourite teams as six thousand feet overhead the unmanned drone continued on its way, beaming footage of the countryside up to a satellite and from there to Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, where a team of three operators stared at a bank of screens. One of the operators was handling the controls, keeping the drone on a steady course to the east. It was a routine patrol and the operators weren't expecting

to see anything. They kept a watchful eye on the screens but spent the time discussing the merits of various blackjack strategies. The base was an hour's drive from Las Vegas and the operators were planning to hit the casinos at the weekend. As they argued over what to do with a pair of eights, they saw the roof of the goatherd's cottage and the thirty or so goats walking listlessly in the afternoon sun as they searched for scrub to sustain themselves, but that was all.