

A man and a woman in dark clothing are walking away from the viewer on a paved airfield. In the background, a large, intense explosion is occurring, with a massive plume of fire and black smoke rising into the sky. Several cars are parked nearby, some of which appear to be damaged or on fire. The scene is set during a sunset or sunrise, with a hazy, orange-tinted sky.

Love, loyalty or duty?
You can only choose one

WITHOUT WARNING

THE JAKE HUNT SERIES

JED HART



Feather Knight Books

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Prologue

Jake Hunt

Incoming mortar fire, I hear the *crump, crump, crump* as rounds walk their way towards me. Metal fragments *fizz* past overhead. *Christ, I think. Can't move. I'm going to die here.*

The other blokes must be warned; we should be in the bunker. My body won't respond, it just lies there in my hooch, still as a fucking corpse. *They'll bury me in pieces, I think. Like Roger Plover, the poor bastard.*

Someone is shouting, 'Jake Hunt, get in the goddamn bunker.'

My mouth opens to call back. *Talk, goddamn it.* I croak a response, and as it always does, the sound of my own voice wakes me. Sweating. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Slowly the tension drains away as reality seeps back in. I'm in Guildford, I think, in the UK. This is my own bedroom. Not a plywood hooch in Vietnam.

Fumbling for the switch, I turn on the bedside light, because I know from experience it is better to wake fully after the dream.

The digital bedside clock is reassuring. Four in the morning, sure, but January 1987. That's good. Then I do what I know is necessary to exorcise the spectres for a month or two. Fully awake, I run through the dream again—slowly and truthfully—as if giving a factual briefing to my Commanding Officer. Facing up to it. Leaving nothing out, not dressing it up or ducking images. As accurately as I can, I describe one flight amongst many during the Tet offensive of 1969.

In my mind, I look across the cockpit at Johnno Willis, flying in the right-hand seat. It's reassuring he's there because I trust him.

If you are in the left-hand seat of a Huey gunship with the minigun sight up, you don't have time to watch your co-pilot.

With Vinh Long fifteen minutes behind us, I turn back and look for targets, finger on the trigger, ready to fire. Johnno has us down in the weeds at ninety knots following the riverbanks and popping up over the trees at the bends so we can catch the bad guys' unawares. The flight took a lot of light calibre fire on the first two insertions.

Now there are two hundred troops on the ground, but also a burning helicopter in the landing zone and four of our own medevac'd out. Johnno makes another hop over the trees then runs in low over a rice paddy, skids just above the levee bank then climbs, cuts hard left ninety degrees and sets me up beautifully along the bank.

In front of us, three guys in North Vietnamese Army green carrying AK-47s jog alongside the river. They are moving away from the troops on the ground but are still aligned with the approach to the landing zone. They'll be well placed to shoot straight up into the underbellies and main rotors of the aircraft next time the flight comes in.

They are main force Viet Cong, the guys that give us the most trouble, not the local black clad peasants who set booby traps at night.

The AK-47s they carry are Russian assault rifles. They were the invention of Mikhail Kalashnikov, who as a child wanted to be a poet. Better he had been, but instead he designed weapons, and very good ones. This was just about the perfect submachine gun for guerrilla warfare. It would take a bashing, suffer dropping in the mud and still fire with total reliability.

The last guy paused, turned, and loosed a burst at us, but it was wild shooting. Unbalanced and on the run like that, there was little chance of hitting us. A mistake. He should have kept going.

My aim is near him, left and low, then I walk the tight, angry hailstorm of minigun fire along the reed beds and across his abdomen as he turns. He is thrown back onto the mud like he's been hit by a Sheridan tank. The other two disappear into the nipa palm at high speed. I take my eyes off the gunsight for a few seconds as we rocket overhead.

This guy is damn nearly sliced in half. His midsection is pinned like a mounted butterfly, clothing and skin driven into the mud on the bank. He can't drag himself any farther. But he tries, and that's what I see each time I have the dream, the exact way he moves.

His upper torso twists in a slalom motion, weaving back and forth as he tries to claw his way to safety. We know he's dead, but the message takes much longer to get through to him.

Then mortar rounds fall, I wake, and the show ends.

It was no pleasure having that dream again, but I don't want to make too much of it. We all saw bad stuff, much worse than that. But your subconscious has its favourites, and that scene was top of the pops for mine. I'll be watching that episode until the day I die.

1

Terrorists are trained not born, and before Amir Bakil learned to be a terrorist, he worked as a waiter. The instruction for his new job took a month, though it seemed to him much longer. Now, waiting on tables was another life. *The calm before the storm*, he thought. That earlier time was like a dream of paradise, and he wanted to go back. But it was impossible.

Amir was a short, wiry Filipino in his mid-thirties, with the nervous mannerisms of a man lacking confidence. He spoke softly and did not look people in the eye; always standing back to let others go first. When in the company of others, he listened rather than spoke.

Although he thought carefully about events around him, he did not try to convince others of his opinions. Why would they be interested? But he believed *absolutely* in three things: his family, the relentless struggle to lift and keep them out of poverty, and his faith. The change of occupation had not been his idea.

A premonition of the trouble he faced came as he worked in London in April of 1986. Israeli security guards working for El Al airlines found one and a half kilograms of Semtex explosives in the bag of Anne-Marie Murphy—a five month pregnant Irishwoman. Along with 364 other passengers, she attempted to board a flight to Tel Aviv. Not that Amir knew anything about the plot beforehand. He was just a Muslim in London who would share the blame.

Asked after her arrest about the explosives and the triggering device that was with them, Anne-Marie said she didn't know they were there. "Nezar gave it to me," she said, referring to the bag.

"Who is Nezar?"

"Nezar Hindawi is my fiancé," she said, proud of the fact at first. Then, realising her situation, she said irrelevantly, "He is Jordanian." Her thoughts were scrambled, doubts overtaking the happy certainty of her future.

“He gave me this bag—” She paused as if seeking an explanation from those that questioned her. “But we are to be married.”

No, thought Amir when he read the transcript. *You will not marry Nezar.*

As a family man, he considered Hindawi despicable. Although he cared little for the Israelis, the notion of so many passengers dying troubled him.

Does any cause justify killing civilians on such a scale? he wondered.

Men at the Hounslow Central Mosque where he worshipped, discussed the matter. A guy who worked as a bouncer spoke confidently to the group surrounding Amir, “Between the two sides in World War II, fifty-five million civilians were killed. Both sides bombed residential areas routinely. There are your Christians for you. It went on for years.”

“What are you saying?” another man asked.

“I’m saying that killing a planeload of passengers is fair retribution. It is also the language they understand. The infidels are happy to bomb us in our countries, bomb our cities and towns, devastate our homes. Kill our families. They are used to bombing civilians, you see, it’s what they do. Why should anyone be shocked or surprised if jihadis kill infidels in retaliation? Who are they killing? Airline passengers with money to travel the world. Jews and wealthy Kafirs. It is the only thing these people understand.”

Amir was unconvinced. Although he said nothing, he posed himself two questions.

If one man committed murder, did that make another murder, right? If an earlier generation committed genocide, did that make the haphazard killing of civilians acceptable now? No, he thought.

In his own mind, he did not condone the use of a pregnant woman to carry explosives. To use any person in such a way seemed cowardly to him and using a woman with an unborn child seemed particularly so. Was a greater good somehow served by making an airliner crash? It was difficult to see how.

Hindawi is a committed fighter? Let him carry his own explosives, Amir thought, *and better still, why not sit down and negotiate rather than murdering innocents?*

What would I do, he wondered, *if I found myself caught up in such a scheme? Would I go to the police? Go home to Jolo in the Philippines? Become a fighter for an Islamic cause?* He did not know.

At least he did not know then, but by December of 1986 his questions were answered, and he wished they were not.

Six forty-five, he looked up from his watch and studied the Cobham house. It was a mansion. His family in the Philippines would view this place with amazement and happily live in just one of its rooms. Sweat trickled from his armpits, and his belly was in nervous turmoil. The adrenalin that pumped in his system made his legs weak, and body tremble.

Today he would strike a blow for Allah, not a mighty blow, but it would be part of a great historic movement. Failure was not an option, but mentally he could not cast himself in the role required. Today he needed to act as if he were a different man. Better to die in the attempt than fail because the lives of everyone he loved were in the balance.

The lessons he had received in Jolo, preparing him for this day came back to him. One line stood out above all others and repeated itself in his mind: “I bring men who desire death as ardently as you desire life.”

Khalid, the original Khalid—because there were many named after him—made that statement in a threatening letter to a Persian monarch twelve years after the prophet died. A mighty fighter for Allah was Khalid, but Amir did not think of himself as such a man. Not the Sword of God or a lion amongst men. That text did not make him feel better. In his heart of hearts, he did not desire death, he wanted to live. Perhaps his time in the UK waiting on tables sapped what courage he once possessed. Each year he travelled from Jolo to work halfway around the world, and he thought that marked him as different from his peers. Today that fact didn't help. He felt weak, sick and afraid.

Thoughts of his family held him to his purpose. For them, he needed to find the courage to do what was necessary, even though it scared him to his core.

My family must not suffer, they are everything in life that I value.

His two companions were poor company. He stared at them, trying to gauge their mood. The driver Hazique Sayid and his companion Mahesh bin Osman were both Malaysians.

With the heater turned off in the van, it was getting colder, and the two shifted about trying to stay warm. One of them smelled bad, which one he couldn't tell. Perhaps the stink came from both of them. They were believers, but petty criminals and unreliable accomplices. Now they were cold,

nervous and grumbling intermittently. Were they thinking about backing out and abandoning their enterprise? *They must not.*

‘Everything is going as it should,’ Amir said. ‘Another fifteen minutes and it will be time. Remember what you must do and make no deviation from our plan. Khalid and all the leaders of Abu Sayyaf are monitoring what we are doing today, *Allahu akbar.*’

The threat was clear. The leadership of Abu Sayyaf did not take kindly to failure; Hazique and Mahesh understood that.

Amir’s mind turned, as it often did, to the man who forced him to do this. Khalid ibn Abi Fayed invaded his thoughts and dreams more often now than ever before. Like a slow acting poison, Khalid destroyed the peace in every corner and recess of his mind and replaced it with fear.

Could such a terrible human be an instrument of divine intervention? Shouldn’t he have redeeming qualities if he worked in Allah’s service? Some spark of divinity or goodness? But there was nothing. The devil incarnate, he thought. That is Khalid, and I serve him out of fear.

But he counselled himself: *The cause is just. The return of the Caliphate is a righteous goal. For more than a thousand years after the death of Muhammad, may his name be blessed. Caliphs ruled the faithful, and Islamic scholars led the world in science, philosophy, law, mathematics and astronomy. Why should it not be so again? Civilisations come and go. Islam is rising, and Christianity is falling. Why not a new Caliphate and why not an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines?*

A dream, he thought with a sigh, and I am not a scholar or a politician. These things are above me, like Khalid himself. He fights for an independent Islamic state and a global Caliphate. Who am I to judge such lofty objectives?

In his heart, Amir believed they were both worthy goals, but he did not want to fight for them. Did he commit some mortal sin by wanting to live in peace with his neighbours? They were people of many religions, creeds and philosophies, but he liked them. Should he hate them instead? Would that be better?

These were thoughts he didn’t voice because if Khalid ever questioned his commitment, Amir was dead, and his family would die with him.

So, he thought, *I remain silent. A voiceless jihadi fighter. Fear is the enemy, and I must be its master. To be fearful is no shame, but I must fight*

against this terror, just as I have fought to raise my family out of poverty.

I cannot be half a jihadi, he told himself. I must become the man I need to be. The thought made him tremble and, having named his objective, he wondered if he could possibly achieve such a thing.

The idea of being a successful jihadi was so alien that he cringed from it. During these short, cold English days, he questioned himself repeatedly. He did not know where he fit in anymore. The world shifted beneath him; he was adrift, desperate, drowning, and he saw no lifeline. Recalling the events that changed his life was painful.

In mid December, Amir returned from London on his annual trip to Jolo City in the southern Philippines. This was his birthplace, and he loved it. Each time he flew back, he marked the contrast between England's green countryside and Jolo. To outsiders, Jolo was a poor and dilapidated place, but it was home to him. The people were humble and scraped a meagre living; few families afforded the luxury of education.

Nevertheless, hard though life was when he walked the streets close to his home, his neighbours greeted him with respect.

I'm somebody here, he thought. This is where I belong.

Amir, the world traveller, held status in the eyes of his neighbours by breaking free from the hardship of life in Jolo. If they resented him, they never showed it to his face, and since he was a kind and generous man, they mostly chose to admire him. They enjoyed his stories of the other side of the world—so long as they were told in moderation—and valued being told about the superiority of life in Jolo. Amir made sure that his stories portrayed Jolo and its people more favourably than the other places and people he described.

The truth, he thought, is different.

When he travelled, he saw amazing things, and by comparison, he could only judge Jolo Island to be an underprivileged part of a poor country. The Philippines was far from the centre of world affairs, and its people were deprived in many ways. *What benefit would they derive by knowing it though? Better they live in happy ignorance.*

The transition to life in the UK was not easy, but he mastered it, and now he sent home hard currency. His wife was beautiful in mind and body, faithful to him as he travelled and worked abroad, and they had four children who were healthy, well dressed and attending school. Their thatched house on stilts marked him as a man with resources. Though he and his wife grew up in communal houses and shanties built over the sea, they lived at a higher level now. Their parents stayed with them and had their own rooms in the thatched house. That fact made Amir proud every day of his life. *I'm not a rich man, but I am successful. I am someone.*

The family reunited just before Christmas, a joyful time when everyone rejoiced and shared what they could. Even as a Muslim family they celebrated the season with gifts like the Catholics. To do that for the sake of the children seemed such an innocent pleasure. That time he spent with his family was precious. There was no greater goal in life than their happiness.

As a waiter in London, he stood in the background until summoned: a quiet, cooperative, almost invisible presence. Anonymous as a fence post or street sign. £3 an hour was what he earned. Less than the average wage, but it was cash in hand. Mostly he did not mind the work; a job could only be viewed as a blessing, and the money he made enabled his family in Jolo to flourish. So what if he disliked the shrill, underdressed kafir women who showed no respect for men and no modesty about their person. The Holy Koran, some said, demanded his hatred of such women. He did not hate them, but neither did he respect them. It galled him to be at their beck and call. *Live with it*, he thought, and he did. By concealing his disdain beneath a façade of smiling willingness, his life worked. Such a small sacrifice of his pride meant his family thrived, and his sons thought him a hero.

—Then, in a single day, Khalid destroyed his life—

Amir was at the Tulay central mosque in Jolo for prayers. The huge white building with four corner minarets towered above the surrounding area. Around it, the simple wooden houses, snaking alleyways, street markets and shanties sheltered the jostling humanity of the township. The call to prayer blared from the mosque and reverberated through the open verandas, hallways and streets like a tidal wave. It swept up the flotsam of the rich, poor, old, young, devout, and impious to kneel side by side. Equal perhaps in the eyes of Allah, but not to one another.

After prayers, Khalid beckoned Amir to talk with him. They stood apart from the other men, between hypostyle columns, which supported fungus stained arches.

Amir knew Khalid by reputation and sight, though he would never have spoken to him on his own initiative. Wahhabi leaders are not approached by waiters.

Behind closed doors, people spoke to him about Khalid:

“A warrior,” they’d said, “demanding the enforcement of Sharia law and return to the simplicity and purity of Islam as practised in the days of the Prophet.”

It was known that he fought for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Even the MILF aim of an independent Islamic state in the Philippines apparently did not satisfy Khalid they confided. Instead, he led the cell within MILF called Abu Sayyaf.

On one thing his neighbours all agreed: the men involved in Abu Sayyaf were fanatics, too extreme to prosper. Amir thought otherwise.

“They will bring trouble to Jolo,” he had told his wife. “They will be watched because they are too dangerous to ignore.”

Discretely, he studied Khalid. His lean body seemed calloused and spare like the trunk of a palm, and he stood more than six feet tall. The long wispy beard he affected added to his gravity, and his moody black eyes stared through Amir’s English clothes and cappuccino skin to his fluttering heart and timorous soul.

A man not entirely of this world, Amir thought. He lacks humanity.

Driven, demanding and frightening, that is what people said of Khalid. The sort of man you fear, for he had a reputation for brutality.

Khalid’s left hand appeared injured or was slightly deformed; he clutched it against the left side of his stomach as if easing pain. He clenched his right hand into a fist when he wasn’t wagging his finger. His eyes were steady as rocks in the sea, boring into Amir and burning his soul like the fire of damnation. There was a barbaric intensity to his words as he spoke. “You live with the infidel, then come back here to this Mosque to pray, but you bring the smell and ways of the kafir with you. You use English soap, buy perfume and American clothes for your wife and foreign shoes for your children. What sort of Muslim are you?” Khalid’s tone became harsh and

scornful though he did not raise his voice. His speech had the certainty of one who has no questions in his mind, only a great calamitous clarity, knowing he was both judge and executioner.

Amir didn't argue. How could he when Khalid acted without fear of reprisal? Violence was his ally, stalking alongside him, waiting for the slightest excuse to explode into action. Bowing his head, Amir said, "I try to be the best Muslim I can be and to provide for my family. If I could find work in Jolo, I would, of course. But I cannot. My apologies if my activities offend you. I will pray to improve and attempt to act with more discretion."

"No," said Khalid, "you will do much more than that."

Then he spoke for a long time while Amir listened with growing fear. Khalid identified all the members of Amir's family, his parents, his wife's parents down to his youngest daughter—everyone who was dearest to him. Their names were on his lips, their ages, where they lived, where the children went to school. His wife's daily routines were recited and criticised.

"Your woman lacks piety," Khalid said. "She wears western clothes and listens to pop music. Why does she not cover her face in public? How can you allow her to go out without a male family member?"

The tirade was typical of Khalid, obsessive, full of detail, malice, judgement and absolute certainty. The conduct he demanded of Amir's wife was disconnected from the reality of daily life in Jolo.

"So," he said as he ended his lecture, "you will serve Abu Sayyaf in the great cause, and you will serve willingly. If you do not, every member of your family will suffer or die, starting with the oldest and finishing with the youngest and you will be last. Do you doubt I will do this?"

The absurdity of threatening a man's family then demanding he be 'willing' was lost on Khalid.

No, he did not doubt that Khalid would do terrible things. Amir could only stammer, shocked, "Please have mercy. How can I serve you? What is it you require of me? I will do anything. Please spare my family."

Who knew what Khalid was thinking? But he seemed satisfied with the response, and so the training sessions began. The prospect of a happy family holiday evaporated, and Amir doubted that such carefree times would ever return.

On the day before he went back to the UK, Amir went to see Khalid at an empty warehouse on the outskirts of Jolo. A century before, the place was used by Chinese traders to sell Enfield and Spencer rifles to the local Sultans so they could fight the Spanish.

The last few years had seen it used for storage of marine gear, and the coastal trading ships discarded their detritus there. Broken pallets, bird and dog shit were scattered over the dusty floor. There were gaps in the woodwork and the morning sun shone through in shafts, like messages from Allah. In one corner Khalid stood in his customary pose, left hand locked against his belly, unsmiling, disapproving. Beside him, two muscular men stood legs apart, negligently carrying AK-47 submachine guns with magazines curved like scimitars. Their presence acted as a silent and menacing backing for Khalid. A third man, one swollen eye closed, knelt before them. They had bound his hands and legs, and duct tape circled his head and covered his mouth. From behind the tape, he made a keening, mewling sound; a plea for mercy that filled the place with a terrible premonition of death.

“This is a man I asked to assist us before you and I met, and I have to decide which of you is best suited to the task,” said Khalid. “He,” Khalid gestured with his right hand to the man kneeling at his feet, “seemed unwilling at first and then when he agreed to assist, I do not think his heart was fully committed to the training. He has no stomach for the work we do, and I do not think his faith is strong enough—” There was a pause, as Khalid allowed this information to sink in. Then he asked, “Do you think you are more suitable?”

Amir swallowed. *Another test?* There was only one possible answer.

“Yes,” he said.

“Then this has worked out well for you,” said Khalid. His eyes drilled into Amir. “You learned to use a handgun. That is good. Today you will practice with a live target.” He handed the .38 Smith and Wesson revolver to Amir; the same one he’d fired in training. “Wait,” he said, “let us get your target moving.”

The guards undid the prisoner’s restraints and threw him down in the filth four metres away. With a sudden jolt of surprise, Amir recognised him. This was a barber who also worked in London and sent money home. They’d met at the airport and arranged to have coffee in a street cafe in Jolo. *What was*

his name? A jolly, talkative fellow, as barbers are, as comfortable in speaking English as he was in Tausug and Tagalog. He even spoke a little Hokkien to the Chinese traders. Once he detoured on his walk home to help Amir buy a cot for his youngest son. Amir enjoyed his company.

Now he wished the man was a stranger. He hefted the pistol in his trembling hand and remembered there was no safety mechanism. *Just cock, point and shoot, or pull the trigger hard to rotate the cylinder. Aim as if I am pointing my finger. Do it instinctively. Don't try to sight over the barrel. Point and shoot. Point and shoot. This barber will die whatever I do*, he thought, as the unfortunate fellow staggered to his feet and stumbled away.

Amir considered the situation of his own family: *Above all else, their lives must be protected.*

Point and shoot. He did. *One.* A puff of dust kicked up a metre away from his target and the bodyguards jeered. A step forward, then he kept advancing, pointing the revolver like an avenging sword in front of him. With the mechanism cocked, he pulled the trigger then fired again, and again—*two, three, four, five.* His victim stumbled and fell facedown as the last three shots hit him. Then Amir stood over him and fired the final round into his back between the shoulder blades. The barber twitched for a time, then lay still, dead, and Amir was thankful that he could not see his face.

Danilo, he remembered, that was his name. *No more haircuts Danilo*, he thought irreverently; he felt drained and confused.

Khalid looked mildly surprised, even pleased. “You have more spirit in you than you know yourself. Now go to your family. Tomorrow you fly back to London, and your work will commence.”

Amir trudged back towards his home. When he was two hundred metres from his house, he went into a quiet alley and wept. Not for the man he killed. Death was no stranger to Jolo, but for himself. If he had ever wondered what sort of man he would become, here was the answer. He was no more than a wild animal fighting for survival, and he had imagined himself better than that.

His thoughts returned to the present. Back to the United Kingdom and his mission here in Cobham. With his companions, he would perpetrate a crime which could cost him his life, or land him in jail for the rest of his days.

What would come after this? It was hard to imagine that he would ever be allowed to return to his old life.

For the present, all he could do was obey and pray.

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