

See All Evil

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Prologue

Captain Alex McCloud looked up when he heard the all-too familiar sound of sniper-fire. It seemed uncomfortably close to the base camp at Kandahar. “Jack! Quick! Come with me!” The two men ran towards the camp entrance and soon saw the crumpled bodies of two Afghan soldiers who had been guarding the camp’s main entrance gates. A third soldier was calling out for assistance and trying to revive the two unfortunate men who were, obviously, beyond any earthly assistance.

Alex and Jack were soon by the man’s side. The young captain was familiar with all three Afghans who had been willing to assist American and British forces in an attempt to rid the country of the Taliban insurgents. To make it worse, all three men were related.

“Did you see the attackers?”

“Yes, Sir.” He looked devastated at the loss of his cousins. “There were four Taliban.” He turned and pointed. Alex looked and saw a vehicle racing away from the camp. Four figures were in the battered vehicle as they made their escape.

Alex wasted no time and ran with Jack towards a light-armoured vehicle. “Watkins! Adamson! Come with us, quickly!”

Within seconds, the four were in their vehicle and racing in pursuit of the killers.

Alex had been assigned to take charge of flushing out groups of Taliban fighters entrenched near to the villages where they could intimidate and keep pressure on frightened residents. Now he had a job to do. “Just get this right!”, he said to himself.

While Jack drove the vehicle, his foot pressed hard on the accelerator, Alex was on his radio, instructing a helicopter pilot to take off and assist in this dangerous task.

After a few minutes driving at speed, on poorly-maintained roads, through village streets, the car entered open countryside with just the occasional small group of dwellings. The car with the Taliban fighters came to a halt near to a mainly open area. They jumped out of their vehicle and ran away in the direction of a simple building. It was one of several similar buildings in this area.

Jack pulled up, without getting too close to the other vehicle, in case it had been booby-trapped. All four ran after the escaping insurgents.

The first three Taliban fighters were easy to dispatch as they, seemingly, made easy targets. When another fighter retreated into the small, ordinary-looking building, Alex’s unit followed, unaware that this was a deadly trap.

As the man ran inside, he quickly hid behind a stack of boxes, waiting for the British soldiers to enter. When he was satisfied that several soldiers were inside the building, he shouted “Praise be to Allah!” and detonated a huge bomb, ensuring not only his own death, but that of several of the infidel fighters.

In the explosion that followed, Alex’s Sergeant and best friend, Jack Prentice, was literally torn to pieces, while Corporal Doug Adamson was decapitated and a third soldier, Private Bill Watkins lost both legs.

Alex felt the full force of the blast, his clothes immediately catching fire, while he received a great deal of shrapnel wounds to his face and one side of his body.

Luckily for him, the force of the explosion hurled him away from the structure and out of further danger from the now, fiercely-burning building. a second huge explosion ripped through the air, making it impossible to retrieve what was left of the bodies of his three unfortunate comrades.

Alex was uncertain what happened next, but, somehow, he stumbled away from the burning mess that had trapped them and, after collapsing, was quickly dragged away by his fellow soldiers who had disembarked from the helicopter and had come to his aid. While enemy snipers were firing at Alex, he was quickly rolled on the ground to extinguish the flames from his burning clothes. Alex was not only dazed, but also completely blinded from the frags which had, painfully, torn into his face, making it impossible for him to help himself. Blood streamed down his shattered face, giving the young soldier a ghoulish appearance, somewhat reminiscent of a horror movie.

As the men in his troop realised Alex’s difficulties, they literally picked him up and carried him to the helicopter which, thankfully, had returned for them. It was pretty undignified, yet life-saving, as they bundled their inert Captain inside. They all scrambled in quickly after him, allowing the heavy machine to lift off, while still being targeted by small-arms fire.

Alex remained unconscious for about three hours, coming round in the military hospital at Camp Bastion.

He would always remember that day vividly. The antiseptic smell, the air of quiet efficiency, but most of all, the strange feeling of isolation. Not just the fact that he was lying in a hospital bed, but,

for all he knew, the on-going battles could be a million miles away, or even ended, though he knew this was extremely unlikely.

He turned slightly in his bed in a vain attempt to get a little more comfortable and winced from the sharp pain.

Out of the darkness, a familiar voice gave him a start. "Hello, Alex. You're back with us, then?"

Alex recognised the deep, now calming tones of Derek, his commanding officer.

He wasted no time and asked the all-important question, "What happened to my men?"

There was an uncomfortable, meaningful pause before the reply came. "A secondary explosion prevented us from getting the others out. Prentice, Adamson and Watkins didn't make it, I'm sorry to say."

Alex had dreaded the bad news, but had feared the worst. "Oh, shit! What a mess! I should have guessed that it was a trap."

Major Derek Connolly could not agree with the young officer. "Don't blame yourself, Alex. If we did not react in case everything was a trap, we would get nowhere. The important thing, now, Alex is to get you better and out of that bed."

Dreading the answers that may be given, he asked the next-important question. "What happened to me? Why can't I see anything?"

Again, another short, yet meaningful pause. "You received about twenty per cent burns, mainly to the left side of your body. The frags caused extensive scarring, particularly to your face and upper body."

"What about my eyes?"

"I'm sorry, Alex. The front portion of both eyes was damaged and the probability is that loss of sight to both eyes could be permanent."

Alex felt as though he had been hit by an express train, metaphorically speaking. Burnt skin and frag wounds could heal, but the news that he would never see again, hit Alex badly. He took a deep, involuntary breath in before asking, "Are you certain about my eyes?" He feared that he knew what the answer would be, even before Derek replied.

His commanding officer sounded apologetic. “The front portion of both eyes was damaged so severely that corneal implants could not even be considered. I am terribly sorry, Alex, but that is the situation as explained to me by the medics.”

Right then, Alex wished that he had died in the battle, along with his men. He could not understand why his own life had been spared, while his future had been so finally and brutally destroyed.

“There’s no future in the army for a blind soldier”, he thought, somewhat bitterly. He could not imagine life without sight, unable to see the magic in a woman’s smile or the wonderment in a child’s innocent face. Even to see the creases and fine lines in his own face as he aged, would be denied to him. His silence said everything.

Alex’s feelings of hostility and despair were not aimed at Major Connolly. He knew that it was his superior’s job to be honest, sometimes to the point of brutality, with the men in his command. One of the disadvantages of climbing up the ranks was the inevitable task of breaking bad news when a death or serious injury occurred.

“Listen, Alex. Tomorrow you will be flown back to the U.K. where you will receive the very best medical treatment. If there is any way that your sight can be restored, then it will be done. I’m just telling you the situation as it is at this moment. Okay?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“It’s alright, Alex. I do understand your frustration. We now have to put our trust in the specialists back home.”

The flight back to England was a very sobering experience. Alex was one of three who were on stretchers along with one female and five male soldiers whose injuries were less severe, allowing them to sit in normal seats.

It was heart-wrenching to realise that, as well as the injured, there were two soldiers in coffins.

Soldiers whose lives had been cut far too short. “What a fucking mess!” he thought. For the men in his own unit who had died in the huge explosion, their bodies would remain in that God-forsaken country, the dignity of being buried on British soil being denied to them. All that was left was the memories of these three brave individuals.

Within a couple of hours after landing, Alex and the other seriously injured soldiers were flown, by helicopter, to Queen Elisabeth Hospital at Edgbaston in Birmingham.

This famous hospital was only opened the previous year and had a world-renowned reputation for the care and rehabilitation of military personnel injured in conflict zones.

The care Alex received was superb. He was fortunate to have burns which were not quite deep enough to need skin grafts. There were many blisters from his shoulders down to his abdomen, causing him extreme discomfort, but, with a great deal of patience and expertise by the medical staff, they would, eventually, be replaced with new skin.

Debbie and Susan handled him with the same care as they would for a premature baby. They gently bathed him, applied liberal quantities of lotions and dressings, where appropriate. The bed in which he lay had an electric ripple-effect mattress, designed to prevent contact sores normally associated with lying in one position for protracted periods of time.

The injuries to his face were, however, a major cause for concern. The metal fragments had torn deep into the flesh and it took surgeons four hours to remove any remaining pieces of metal and repair the facial tissue as much as possible.

Chapter One : 20th. April, 2011

“Shit!” The bandages were unbearably tight around Alex’s head and he wished somebody, anybody, would loosen them enough to ease the throbbing pain in his damaged skull. There was little of his head not tightly bandaged apart from his nose and mouth. He tried, with fingers that did not feel like his own, to fumble with the bandage, but, try as he might, he was still unable to find a loose end.

“Shit! Shit!” He was not, under normal circumstances, the kind of guy who casually uttered even this mildest of profanities, but, now, in his present situation, it actually seemed quite appropriate. The effort exhausted him and he gave up, sinking back onto the bed, defeated and deflated. Naively, he hoped that nobody had observed him pulling at his bandages, but a nurse had and rushed over to his bedside. “Alex! Please leave your bandages alone. They are tight for a reason.”

Alex grunted. He knew Debbie, the nurse, was correct, but this did not lessen his feelings of frustration. He lay exhausted from his futile efforts.

Sensing his frustration and sadness, Debbie softened a little. “Is there anything I can get you, Alex?” There was not a hint of humour in his voice as he replied, “How about a new body?”

She gave a wan smile. “Listen, Alex. You do have a good body, believe me.” She was not just saying this to please him. Debbie had seen him naked many times and wished she had a guy with such a muscular frame in her own life. With Alex, “everything”, and she really meant “everything”, was in the right proportion.

Debbie was single and, at twenty-eight, after a few forgettable relationships, wondered if there would ever be someone special in her own life. Her past sexual partners had, to put it simply, not come up to expectations. Why a man should think that a two or three minute fumble should be enough to satisfy a woman, she could never comprehend. Why is it that men find it impossible to understand what a woman really needs? Her blushes, at these most intimate thoughts, went unseen. “You’re healing well and, with a little patience, you will make a full recovery.”

If anyone knew what his body was like, it was Debbie and her colleague, Susan, who worked alongside her. Ever since Alex had been flown from Afghanistan and brought into the Intensive Care Unit, three weeks earlier, these two women had bathed, cleaned and assisted him to use the bedpan and probably knew every inch of his body in far greater detail than anyone else, even including himself. They had fed him intra-venously when he was incapable of looking after himself as a result of the heavy cocktail of drugs necessary for pain relief.

He struggled to speak clearly, his voice not following his thoughts, coughed a little and then tried again. "I could do with a drink, please, Debbie. My mouth is so dry."

"Of course." Debbie pressed the controls to raise the head of the bed, making it easier for her difficult patient to drink. She placed the cup into Alex's hand and, using a straw, he gulped down a few, welcoming mouthfuls of fruit juice.

"Thanks, Debbie. That's much better. I'm sorry for being such a pain in the butt." He laid back, irritated that even the slightest effort, such as sitting up, exhausted him. He had never felt so incapable and useless as he did now. He felt that his abilities had been reduced to that of a baby and not a very intelligent one, at that.

"Don't worry, you are getting better and I am not joking when I tell you that we have had much worse patients than you." She hesitated, uncertain if she should tell Alex of one of her more memorable experiences which had left her in tears, but, then, after only a moment's hesitation, continued, with some bitterness in her voice. "About ten months ago, a Colonel Peter Bower was admitted into this unit. He had lost his leg, after being caught in a Taliban suicide bombing. He received the same amount of attention as everybody else in Intensive Care, but this had never been quite enough for him. One day, I had been late with his medication, as a consequence of one of the more critically ill patients dying. I was upset as the unfortunate young soldier had been a war hero and, to my mind, the string of obscenities and insults from the Colonel was completely unjustified and unnecessary." Brushing away a tear at these painful memories, she added, "I could never imagine you emulating the officious Colonel."

After hearing her story, Alex realized how dedicated all the nursing staff were and, in that moment, he was determined not to make their jobs any more difficult. "I am so sorry, Debbie."

“Don’t worry about it. It’s all part of the job and I really do love my work.” The diligent nurse adjusted Alex’s bed again, using the remote control, made certain he was as comfortable as possible and, quietly, returned to her nurses’ station.

He could smell her perfume as she had leaned over him and the sweet, distinctive scent had lingered even after she had moved away. “Nothing wrong with my sense of smell”, he thought. This was not the only sense which had survived, but had, like most young men, always been lurking, just beneath the surface. “Wonder if she is good-looking?” He imagined that she had slim, attractive features. Bright, seductive eyes, small, angular nose and full, soft, delightfully-tempting lips.

Alex did know that she had long, silky hair as it had touched his arm when she had leaned over him a few days earlier. He felt certain that, had Debbie strictly followed hospital regulations, she should have had it tied back, but there had been occasions, perhaps on her late shift where she had, temporarily, let her hair down.

“Wonder what colour her hair is?” He could ask her, but, for some inexplicable reason, felt a little reticent. In his mind, her hair would be black, long and silky, contrasting against her soft, milk-white skin. He imagined her naked, displaying her small, firm breasts, slim waist and slender hips. He knew that he may be disappointed if the reality did not meet up to his erotically vivid imagination, but, well, it helped to pass the time. “Bet she’s great in bed”, he thought, remembering stories in his youth of the many sexual antics indulged in by members of the nursing profession when off or even on duty, but, of course, that did not mean that these rumours were true. Still, imagination worked wonders when the body was incapable of much, if any action.

Apart from this interest in the females looking after him, Alex’s feelings were a mixture of anger, boredom and regret that he was unable to see or do anything useful for himself, just as if he was an infant, once again.

Before all this, he was a picture of physical fitness. His six foot two inch, fourteen stone muscular frame enjoyed the admiration of both men and women alike, when he was a twenty-four year old captain in the British Paratroop regiment.

He not only had strength of body, but was extremely confident, self-disciplined and perfect material for the strict requirements of the British army.

At twenty, he had undergone the rigorous training at Sandhurst Military Academy, leaving as a commissioned officer. He had wanted active service and, when he was posted to Afghanistan in two thousand and nine as a second lieutenant, he knew that this was exactly what he wanted. Alex certainly did not relish the idea of a regular occupation, which meant a mindlessly, boring, nine to five desk job, five days a week for the next forty-odd years. For many, this would have been perfectly acceptable and infinitely preferable to having no job at all. For Alex, it would be like living in a permanent state of limbo, with no challenges and no excitement.

He had wanted action, adventure and, of course, a certain degree of danger. His parents, however, were not so convinced and, fearing for his safety, tried to persuade him to take a less leading role in military activities.

Even at the age of six, the energetic youngster had declared that, when he was grown-up, he was definitely going to be a soldier. All through school, as well as achieving good results in academic subjects, he had excelled at swimming, rugby, football, gymnastics and long distance running. He not only had great strength of body, but was also determined enough to excel in anything which would assist his military future.

It was not as if there had even been anyone in the close family with a military background. His father, James, was a barrister and his grandfather, Richard, an accountant, both, in Alex's opinion, quite sedentary, extremely boring occupations.

The one exception to this was his Mother's brother, Uncle Robert. After ten years in the Royal Air Force, he was now a senior pilot with Singapore Airlines. He was the only one who could understand the hunger for military action, so apparent in the youngster. When he had the opportunity to talk to Alex in private, he would tell of his own military experiences, particularly his missions in defence of the Falkland Islands and, generally, encouraged the attentive Alex, even creating a degree of tension with his sister and brother-in-law, when they realized how his words were influencing their son. Yet nothing would dissuade the determined youngster from his goal.

Both Louise, his mother, and James, knew that their son had ambitions to have a combat role and were disappointed, though not surprised when he left the U.K. for a six month tour of duty. During

this time, he had shown great courage and strength of character and a worthy example of a commissioned officer.

Alex had been involved in many risky maneuvers, coming close to death on numerous occasions. In one of these he managed to rescue a teenage girl and her family after they were threatened and attacked by the Taliban. This was all because the girl was determined to be well educated, something which the Taliban seemed to fear and do their best to prevent. The girl had been injured, but, thanks to the intervention of Alex and his combat group, not seriously. Alex could not understand the mentality of Taliban thinking. Do they really fear domination by women? Is this why females seem to be so dominated by men and repressed within the Islamic faith? He had heard of young, unmarried women who had been brutally, stoned to death after being discovered in an intimate relationship, while the man, apparently would , escape without fear of any punishment. Why should women accept anything less than full equality?

It was a great relief for his proud parents when he safely completed his six month tour of duty and returned to the U.K., as a newly-promoted Captain Alex McCloud.

He had everything going for him. A career he loved and Helen, his fiancé, who had been an important part of his life for the past three years.

The problems started when he returned to Kandahar Province in Afghanistan in December, two thousand and ten. The troubles were escalating and the Taliban were proving to be ever more resourceful in their efforts both to evade and attack foreign troops.