

# Necessary Evil

Shaun Hutson

'... We were born of risen apes, not fallen angels, and the apes were armed killers besides ...'

Robert Ardrey

## **Al Hajof, Eastern Iraq, 1990**

If they could reach the village they might stay alive.

All three men knew that.

As they ran over the burning sand they kept their wide eyes fixed on the minaret rising from the cluster of red stone buildings in the distance. In the heat haze it was like a beacon, beckoning them to what they prayed would be safety.

The sand dunes and the village swam before them, behind a curtain of shimmering heat. A product both of the blistering sun at its zenith in a cloudless sky, and also of their dehydration.

They'd been running for hours. Now they sought reserves of energy they thought they didn't have. But fear was a great motivator. Somehow they forced themselves on, across sand that was, by turns, as hard as concrete or as soft and shifting as mounds of dust.

Sweat soaked their clothes. One of the men had discarded his tunic. The raw weals on his back open to the glare of the sun. When he fell, particles of sand stuck to the wounds and the congealed blood. But he hauled himself on, sucking in great lungfuls of burning air. It was like inhaling the fumes from a blast furnace.

All of the men were weak with thirst and exhaustion. The second of them occasionally slowed his pace as the pain in his right leg became too intense. But, despite his suffering, he drove himself on. Towards the village that promised shelter, even if it was only for precious minutes. They would be minutes out of the savage sunlight and a respite from the heat that felt as if it was boiling the blood in their veins. And there might be water there. The thought spurred all three of them on.

They crested one of the sand dunes, the first of the men stumbling. He hit the hot sand and rolled to the bottom, coughing and spluttering. He spat the dried particles from his mouth. One part of his mind told him to lie down on the sand and wait for death. Wait for the sun to burn him, to suck up what little moisture remained in his body. It would all be over then. All the suffering. All the pain.

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But the other part of him wanted to live. To continue running. To survive. To escape.

The other two hurried down behind him, trying to dig their feet into the slope to slow their headlong progress. Neither waited to help the first man to his feet. There wasn't time. They couldn't afford to think about anyone but themselves.

The fallen man clawed his way across the sand for a few yards, the palms of his hands burning on the surface. Then, with a gasp of despair, he hauled himself to his knees. Fighting for breath he managed to stand, swaying uncertainly for a second. Then he began to move again. Somehow he forced his legs to carry him on across the scorched terrain.

The village couldn't be more than half a mile away now. Ahead of him, the other two continued on their stumbling way, never once looking back at him.

He stopped for a second. Every breath drawn into his lungs was like inhaling fire. He wiped sweat from his stinging eyes and blinked to try and clear his vision. Half a mile.

Move.

Something grabbed his ankles. Something that moved beneath the sand. It gripped him with incredible strength and now, despite his breathlessness, he found the power to scream.

The other two men turned and looked back at him. Saw him rooted to one spot, his arms flailing, his eyes staring madly down at his feet.

He looked to them imploringly for interminable seconds then, as they watched, he was dragged down into the sand. With one dizzying movement, he disappeared beneath the shifting particles like a drowning man beneath the waves.

A huge gout of blood fountained up from the place where he'd disappeared, rising like a crimson geyser before spattering the desert all around.

Every muscle screaming, their hearts and lungs on the point of bursting, the other two men ran on.

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### **London, the Present Day**

The public bar of the King George in Islington was busy. Like most pubs it offered the delights of big screen satellite football, a jukebox and food. But, in the manner of more traditional establishments, it also boasted pool, bar billiards and, on a weekly basis, live music.

The pub was usually full on those nights, particularly at the weekends when singers and bands whose styles ran from jazz to rock would air their talents before mostly discerning listeners. Genuinely talented musicians could perform for a reasonable fee, while simultaneously lamenting the fact that the business they had chosen to make a living in cared little for creativity any longer, but chose instead the manufactured nonentities that polluted the nation's radios and TVs.

As Matthew Franklin drained what was left in his pint glass and pushed the empty receptacle in the direction of a passing barmaid, the same thought occurred to him. He nodded and smiled at the barmaid who refilled his glass and took his money. Franklin's eyes never left the band who were performing that night. Particularly their singer.

Amy Holden was twenty-eight, two years younger than Franklin. A petite, thin-faced young woman dressed in a white shirt worn over a dark blue T-shirt and leather trousers that hugged her shapely thighs and backside gratefully.

Franklin took another sip of his lager and ran appraising eyes over her, from the tip of her high-heeled boots to the top of her light brown, shoulder-length hair.

There was power in her voice that belied her small frame. She and the three musicians backing her (a drummer, guitarist and bass player) had already run through several covers. The one of the Stones' 'Gimme Shelter' had sent an already appreciative audience into raptures. But Franklin had been glad to note that the two songs Amy had penned herself had been greeted with equal enthusiasm. After the second one (a ballad called 'At the End of Time'), she had looked across at him and smiled.

The gesture had sent a shiver down his spine. She had written it for him. She'd told him one night as they lay in bed. She'd first read the lyrics to him then sung them softly as she'd gazed down at him.

Now he watched and listened with the same combination of awe and pride that he felt whenever he watched her perform.

They'd been together for the last five years. They had met in a pub similar to this and a hundred other smoky establishments all across the capital. He'd watched her sing that first time and been struck by her looks as much as her talent. He'd offered to buy

her a drink and she'd refused but, the next night, she'd accepted during a break in the set. They'd talked and found there was a very strong attraction between them. She'd moved in with him three months later. Franklin smiled at the recollection.

Amy didn't earn a fortune pursuing her dream but it was a help. The rent on their flat in Clerkenwell wasn't cheap and any extra money was greatly appreciated.

He heard two men close by murmuring something under their breath, one of them pointing at Amy. Both smiled lewdly and one licked his lips.

Have a good look, dickhead. That's as close as you'll get.

Franklin was used to that kind of reaction. In fact, he'd have been disappointed if Amy hadn't elicited it. Nevertheless, it didn't prevent him from shooting the two men a look of contempt.

Pricks.

He was about to down what was left in his glass when he felt the vibration from the mobile in the pocket of his leather jacket. He pulled the Nokia free and checked the caller's number.

It was the call he'd been expecting.

Franklin got to his feet and moved quickly through the other drinkers, away from the band and Amy.

Only when he reached the pavement beyond the main doors of the pub did he answer the phone.

'Yeah, I'm on my way,' he said tersely. 'I'll be there in fifteen minutes.'

### **Al Hajof, Eastern Iraq, 1990**

Death was close.

Now the two remaining men knew that for sure. It was very close.

Urged on by the fate of their companion, they found extra strength. Drew on reserves of energy that could only have been found by what they had witnessed.

They ran past several rusty corrugated iron huts on the outskirts of Al Hajof, glancing over their shoulders every few seconds.

The dusty dirt road that led into the village snaked past a small petrol station and a market, then opened out into a large square. Straight ahead of them was the mosque, the minaret now towering almost mockingly over them. To their right was a bombed-out school. To their left were the foundations and metal supports of a building that had been started but never finished.

Al Hajof was deserted.

There was no one to be seen although both men still wondered if there were eyes upon them – watching from some vantage point that they could not detect.

The rusty shell of an estate car stood to one side of the square, all four wheels missing, the bodywork decaying like a rotting corpse. Paint was peeling off the chassis like leprous skin. One of the doors was slightly open and it swung in the hot breeze that whipped across the square. The hinges groaned, and every now and then a particularly strong gust would slam the door back against the frame of the abandoned car, making the whole thing vibrate. Surveying all of this were countless posters and murals of Saddam Hussein. Saddam as a soldier. Saddam as a teacher. The lifeless painted eyes stared blindly at them from every direction.

The second man dropped to his knees momentarily, looking back fearfully along the dusty road.

When they came, that was the route they would take.

He tried to say something to his companion but his mouth was so dry with thirst and terror that he could utter only a low croak.

The third man was dashing backwards and forwards madly as if searching for something.

Some shelter from the sun?

Somewhere to hide?

They both knew that was impossible.

The second man saw a stone well and scrambled towards it, praying that it was not dry. The red sand dust on the structure made it look as if it was constructed from lumps of congealed blood.

He looked over the rim and found himself gazing down into blackness. His heart sank but then he grabbed a stone and dropped it into the well. There was a second's delay, then a loud plop as it hit water. Gasping, but still ever vigilant, he reached for the battered wooden bucket that hung over the well and began to lower it into the darkness.

The other man joined him, watching as the bucket was hauled up once more. It was full of rancid water but neither man seemed to care. They pushed their hands into

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the dark fluid, supping some, ignoring the foul taste. The rest they splashed on their cracked and burning skin.

The water made the third man retch but he persevered, gulping down more from his cupped hands. He was more concerned with slaking his raging thirst than with the vile state of the fluid he was drinking.

He used both hands to splash his face and torso, then moved away from the well towards one of the nearest buildings. His companion remained crouched over the hole, intermittently coughing loudly and gulping down the rancid water. He was gripping the rim of the well with one bloodied hand, as if unable to straighten up.

The other man reached the building he sought and stepped inside.

Even under cover it was stiflingly hot. Flies buzzed in the heavy air and there was a stench of rotting food. He moved through into the back of the building where there were several wooden tables. On two of them lay the carcasses of animals and the man realised he was standing in what had once been a butcher's shop. Recently abandoned too by the look of it. There were two metal rails running across the low ceiling, each one bearing five or six meat hooks. The tip of one was still dull with congealed blood.

He could only guess at how long the carcasses had been there. Each one was covered in a seething blanket of black flies. He looked around the room, scanning it for anything he might use as a weapon.

There was a long knife lying on top of a metal worktop and he snatched it up, wielding it before him.

Perhaps now he would have a chance. He had something to fight back with.

A slight smile creased his face.

It vanished instantly as he felt incredibly powerful hands grab his shoulders.

He shrieked as he was dragged backwards, lifted off his feet like a puppet.

The movement happened so quickly he hardly realised. Only as he was spun round did it register. Then he was rushed towards the nearest meat hook. His screams grew in intensity as he was raised higher, moved closer to the point.

Then he was slammed downwards.

The point of the meat hook pierced his throat and tore the flesh as he was jammed on to the metal, the hook ripping effortlessly through his bottom jaw then upwards into his skull. Blood burst from the wounds as he was forced even further on to the hook, until the tip finally cracked the top of his skull and protruded an inch through the

bone. His body twitched madly as it hung there and blood splattered noisily onto the ground around him.

His assailant was already gone, moving out into the square, towards the well.

The other man was nowhere to be seen.