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Legacy

Written by James Steel

Published by Avon

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JAMES STEEL

Legacy

AVON

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AVON
A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fullham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2010

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-160-2

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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SUNDAY 21 SEPTEMBER, LUCAPA DIAMOND FIELD, ANGOLA

The whisper came through the African night.

'Zero, this is Lima Three.'

He pressed the radio earpiece hard against his head, focusing on that quiet voice from the throat mike feeding him information. He clicked the transmit key twice to acknowledge his forward observer silently.

The voice whispered again.

'Sighting report as at two-zero-four. At junction of Gully Red and Gully Yellow now. Infantry. Estimate platoon strength. Moving south.'

He checked the map. This was what it was all about, everything he did: contact with the enemy. They had waited for the moon to go down and hoped to hit the diamond mine just before dawn.

He turned round from his command post, a

groundsheet hung up under an acacia tree with the radio on a stack of empty ammunition crates. Its dim glow was the only light. Behind him was the mortar platoon, black shapes in the darkness.

'Fire Plan India,' he called in an urgent whisper to the nearest crew, who repeated it down the line. The men twisted the elevation screws and the tubes rose slightly to lengthen the range. The 81mm mortars stared blank-eyed up into the night, blind to the destruction they would cause.

Yamba, the platoon sergeant, scuttled down the line to check the four crews were ready. Then he came close so that his dark face could be seen in the glow from the radio set. He nodded.

'Zero, this is Lima Three. Fire mission.'

'Lima Three, this is Zero. Fire mission. Out.'

He waited for the details; pencil stub paused over a dog-eared pad.

'Fire mission. Grid: three-zero-eight-four-eight-one. Bearing three-two hundred mills. Infantry in gully. Destroy now. One minute. Over.'

He repeated the fire-control orders back to the observer. Then he stood up and turned to the mortar line. The time for action had come.

'Open fire!'

He barked the order out in a harsh voice that tore away the veil of silence that had cloaked them.

The mortars made their distinctive *thunk* sound and spat their metal loads up into the night. White

flames shot up out of the tubes. Base plates slammed and rang with the recoil.

The crews turned away from them when they dropped each round down. They jammed their fingers in their ears, but still it did not stop the feeling of being kicked in the head by the propellant burst.

After the first rounds dropped down the tube he grabbed the mike and called urgently: 'Lima Three. Shot five!' to indicate the number of seconds before impact.

The response came equally abruptly as the observer took cover.

'Shot five. Out!'

They pumped round after round out at the stars. The forward observer, dug into a foxhole a mile away, could see the vivid flashes of orange in the night where the shells landed but he could not see the murderous swarms of metal splinters that they unleashed through the air when they burst.

The observer called in a correction.

'Drop fifty! Over!' he shouted loudly now over the din.

Range screws were twisted on the mortars.

'On target! Over!'

Figures ran, stumbled and fell. They blundered around, shocked by the blasts. An officer's whistle blew desperate signals but then stopped abruptly

as a bomb hit. Eventually no more movement could be seen.

'Cease loading!' The shout went down the line and the last rounds fired off.

The crews froze and stared at their officer. The silence that followed was as stunning as the terrible noise that they had just been making.

He shouted brisk commands at them as he swept on his webbing and grabbed his assault rifle.

'Col! You take Charlie fire team and a tracker, and sweep east of Gully Yellow. Yamba! Bring Delta fire team with me! We'll sweep west!'

Alex Devereux looked down at the bodies laid in a row on the ground.

There were thirteen of them, teenagers mainly, but a couple of men in their twenties and one who must have been forty, a UNITA guerrilla veteran from the Angolan civil war, and presumably their commander. They were either barefoot or wore an assortment of wellies and trainers, with ragged T-shirts and patched trousers.

In the follow-up sweep to the mortar ambush their torches had revealed the carnage in the gully. In the confined space the blast of the bombs had blown the insurgents against the walls and ripped them apart.

The trackers had followed the blood trails from the scene. Dark splashes on the ground and smears

on elephant grass stems led them to their quarry. Two had been injured and had crawled a few hundred yards before collapsing.

The trackers, Yamba and Sunday, knew their stuff. As the blood got fresher they signalled the squad to fan out in a line and switch off their torches. Eventually Alex's squad heard the laboured breathing and mumbling of the wounded man as he dragged himself along.

Quick stabs of gunfire in the dark and he went down. No rules of engagement and warnings given here. He wasn't in the regular army any more.

They went back and cast around for more tracks, but by the time they followed them up the survivors were long gone; the tracks showed them running wildly and crashing through bushes, terrified, desperate to escape.

The men dragged the bodies back to the gully and laid them out neatly. In the morning, the local Angolan army commander posed in front of them with a grinning thumbs up for the camera. He had the shots framed for the wall of his office back at the mine.

The captured weapons were laid out on the ground: nine AK-47s, four RPG launchers, three PKM light machine guns and some Claymores to cover their retreat. They were well armed.

All in all, a good night's work.

Alex stood with his hands on his hips and

frowned. Six foot four, broad shoulders, a strong masculine face – he looked very threatening like that. He ran his hand through his short black hair, rubbed the back of his neck and stared down at one of the boys; a mess of flies was fidgeting in a wound on his cheek.

Fourteen years old?

Major Alexander Devereux. Wellington College. Blues and Royals. Forty. Single. Child-killer.

A cold darkness of self-loathing settled over his heart.

1501; CONSTANTINOPLE

The dancers in the graveyard waited silently for the signal.

Their faces, lit by flames, stared at the huge man standing in the centre of their circle.

Abba Athanasius was a Nubian, dressed now as an Ishfaqi mystic. His body was a slab of black muscle, more like a force of nature than flesh and blood. He was naked but for a black loincloth and kudu-skin bands that decorated his arms and legs.

Sensing the hour, he held up his right arm and bellowed, 'Dance for the darkness in your heart!'

'Amen!' they roared, and the music began.

In the centre of the circle, black men drummed on hollow logs; staring unseeing at the flames. Light gleamed off the sweat on their muscles.

Other musicians played flutes and horns. The cult

was of every creed and colour: Muslims, Christians, Druze, Alawites, Copts, Maronites and Bogomils.

The crowd danced as if they were one. Concentric rings of people moved in and out like a giant organism breathing. Their stamping feet stirred up the dust in the moonlight.

The dancers ululated. They made sharp cracks with little brass hand-cymbals. The sound was deafening, a heavy cloth of noise draped over them, suffocating their senses.

Abba Athanasius ran to and fro in the middle of the rings. He held a small drum in one hand and struck it repeatedly with a stick. He bounded around the circle, leaped in the air and screamed at the crowd, urging them on.

A young German knight, Eberhardt von Steltzenberg, danced himself into a frenzy and opened his heart to a nefarious force.

The rhythm grew faster and faster. The crowd shouted louder and louder. The drummers beat harder and harder.

The witch doctor suddenly stood stock-still. Sensing a spiritual climax he threw an arm up into the air.

'Silence!' he bellowed, and the drummers and musicians stopped.

The crowd gave a great groan as though winded by a blow. A sorrowful sound; as if coughed up out of the recesses of their souls.

The silence was overwhelming. It pressed itself into their heads. Men cried out and fell down on their knees.

Abba Athanasius called out to the drummers, in a quiet voice, 'Softly,' and they began a gentle rhythm.

As they played, the black priest picked a large metal censer off the ground. It was made of three heavy iron chains attached to the rim of a metal pan. A lid with holes in it slid down the chains to cover the pan. Abba Athanasius flung the container into the fire and scooped it out, brimming over with hot coals.

As he was doing this, a gang of huge Nubian men pushed their way in through the crowd. They were naked as bulls, faces as powerful and impassive as cliffs.

Four of them were holding staves with solid metal ends, which they used to push the crowd aside. Behind them came a man lugging a narrow iron bucket, and two more carrying a heavy chest between them. Another four held the poles of a litter supporting a three-foot-long lump of rock like black glass. The Nubian Deathstone. The men staggered under its weight.

It was so dark and shiny that it seemed to have a light inside it, as if it knew something.

They pushed their way through the worshippers. When they came into the clearing they set the litter

down. The priest leaped onto it, straddling the Deathstone, silhouetted in the light of the fire. His hands grasped the shaft of a sledgehammer and swung it up over his head. With a cry he brought down a swingeing blow on the stone.

The sound rang out and a lump the size of a fist split off. The priest scrambled to pick it up. He held the rock above his head to show to the devotees. They groaned like cattle.

Abba Athanasius flung the lump into the metal mortar that the Nubians had brought with them. The men with poles arranged themselves around it and began to pound the rock to powder with their metal staves, just like the women in their home villages pounded cassava. They drove the heavy poles down so that they thudded in a constant rhythm.

As they worked, the priest threw open the chest; using a trowel he heaped incense from it into the censer. Lumps of myrrh produced a cloud of sweet fragrance. Other spices threw up puffs of white smoke. Finally he poured in trowels of opium resin.

When the rock was ground to powder the priest stood up on the litter and raised the heavy mortar above his head. A Nubian held the censer up to him by its chains. Abba Athanasius bent down and carefully poured the fine black crystal powder onto the pile of ingredients and then slid the cover down the chains and over the pan.

Black smoke poured out of holes in the lid. The huge monk took hold of the chains and whirled the censer around his head, sending out clouds of sparks into the night whilst he chanted prayers.

He gestured to the crowd to kneel and made his way around the rings of worshippers with the censer, dispensing a strange benediction. As he moved along the lines of kneeling figures he held the chain so that the pan passed underneath each bowed head. Evil, black clouds of narcotic smoke poured out, and each worshipper took a deep inhalation.

Eberhardt kneeled and stared at the Deathstone. Its gleaming black depths mesmerised him; he could feel it reaching out to him, pulling him into its mystery.

What was its secret knowledge?

Where had it come from?

What was it saying to him?

He knew he had to find its source, hidden somewhere in the heart of Africa. It would be his purpose in life.

He heard the priest coming along the row. The young knight had been shaken by the worship; his broad shoulders trembled with each breath. He bowed his head as the priest neared; his long, brown hair fell around his face. Nervously he brushed it back behind his ears. The huge man was mumbling some blessing in a language that he did not understand, over and over again as he walked slowly along.

Eberhardt could see the red glow of the censer out of the corner of his eye and prepared himself.

The first whiff of smoke caught at his nose, intensely fragrant. He forced himself to take a huge gulp of it as it passed under him.

Hot, noxious vapour filled his throat and bronchioles. He felt a seizure in his respiratory tract under the powerful chemical assault.

His throat burned and convulsed. He could not breathe. The strong opiate hit his brain as the black miasma of the Deathstone worked its way into his body and being.

Darkness invaded his heart.

He felt both lifted up and cast down, overawed and appalled. He had been invested by something profound yet terrible.

He clutched at his throat but no air came in. He passed out and fell face down on the ground.

THURSDAY 6 NOVEMBER, LONDON

'Alexander, this is your father.'

The upper-class growl was slurred by drink.

His father's use of Alex's full name was a danger signal. He was in a fighting mood, when the frustrations in his life boiled over and he picked fights with those closest to him to displace his anger.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Alex was at his desk in his family's house in Fulham. He did a quick mental calculation: it was after lunchtime so his father must be drunk. He could picture him now, wearing his old tweed suit, sitting in his worn armchair in the drawing room of Akerley, the family house in Herefordshire, where he lived alone, looking out of the big bay window over the parkland.

Sir Nicholas Devereux was an ex-cavalry officer and an alcoholic. The Devereux had been loyal servants of the Crown since Guy D'Evreux had

fought for the Conqueror at Hastings. There had been one of the family serving in the Household Division every year since Waterloo – until Alex left without a son to replace him. Membership of the family might have its privileges but it came with its burdens as well.

Alex knew where his father's problems stemmed from: the source of all known evil – his grandmother. She was an intelligent, strong-minded woman trapped by social convention in the role of an aristocratic adornment. Her talents had turned sour and she took to displacing her personal disappointments on others, dismembering their characters with a cold sadism. Her acidic remarks had been fired at her son from the end of the long dining-room table for years, and had knocked his confidence to bits, driving him to drink and then to taking out his frustration violently on his wife. She had told Alex later that the first time he had beaten her had been on their wedding night.

Alex sometimes wondered if he was next in line for this legacy. Whether he would simply repeat the pat-tern of negative behaviour, transmitted down through the generations in a cycle of anger and destruction. The Devereux might be an ancient, landed family but the poison and the privilege seemed to go hand in hand.

However, it was one thing to understand his father's problems, another entirely to deal with them.

Alex's upbringing had been a painful one, surrounded by the conflict between the Devereux's supposed noble grandeur and wealth, and the crappy reality of the life around him – his father's drinking bouts and his attacks on Alex's mother. He remembered the fear that gripped him and his younger sister, Georgina, when the fights erupted. The two of them used to run off to a barn to hide until they guessed that their father had passed out. They had avoided those conflicts but George hadn't got away from the problem entirely. Anorexia had forced her to leave Wycombe Abbey and she was now married to a similarly vain, flashy man, Rory, a barrister who drank too much.

Alex and George's mother had struggled valiantly to keep their dysfunctional home together, until stomach cancer had overwhelmed her when Alex was in his early teens. Things had started to go downhill soon afterwards. The electricity had been cut off regularly, and he remembered overhearing the shouting matches between his father and suppliers in the courtyard when they turned up at the house demanding payment.

The most humiliating episode for Alex had been when he was summoned to a meeting with his housemaster at boarding school, who explained in the kindliest tones that he was going to have to leave because his fees hadn't been paid. Alex had gone home for a week until another field had been

sold off to pay the bill. He had burned with shame as he had walked into breakfast on his first day back amid the other boys' taunts and jeers.

Despite all this, Alex had been brought up to be loyal and dutiful. Wellington was an army school and had drilled the service ethic into him – although he couldn't help seeing the irony of its motto: 'Sons of heroes.' His father had insisted that Alex follow him into the Blues and Royals straight from Wellington, without going to university: 'You don't need any of that leftie claptrap.'

His father's reputation and his own lack of a degree had been key factors in Alex not being promoted from major to colonel. He had thus faced the prospect of becoming that stock figure of quiet ridicule in English society: the passed-over major. A Tim-Nice-But-Dim, a try-hard who had never made it. Traditionally they were to be found in retirement in the provinces, living off their pensions, running village fêtes or gymkhanas.

His upbringing had left Alex with a brittle pride. This touchiness would not let him face the ignominy of hanging around the regiment to complete sixteen years' service before picking up his pension, so he had left and joined the world of private military companies. He was a romantic and hated the idea of joining his former colleagues in the usual safe jobs they went on to – insurance broking or estate agency – and so he had

turned to becoming the original freelancer.

His father had objected virulently, spitting out the word 'mercenary' with contempt. In response Alex was quietly and bitterly angry at him for having ruined his chance of serving his country as he'd hoped. An intense suppressed tension had existed between them ever since.

'Hello, Dad,' Alex said now in a controlled voice. He tried above all things not to lose his temper. His father was pathetic but he was still his father.

'So, have you fixed that roof of yours then?'

The roof in the family home in Bradbourne Road was leaking. His father had a sixth sense for picking out the things that were bothering Alex most and challenging him on them. 'Keeping you on your toes', he called it.

Alex had been back in London a month now since his contract in Angola had ended. He had effectively put himself out of a job by finishing off the bandits who had plagued the Lucapa diamond mine since the end of the civil war.

Money was the other main issue chiselling away at Alex's heart. He had no new assignments lined up and his usual contacts in the defence business had not been able to pass on even the hint of a new project. It usually took several months to get a contract sorted out and he was not sure how he was going to pay the bills and fix his leaking roof in the meantime.

Lists of figures would drift through his head at night. There was the exorbitant estimate to redo the roof, which, combined with all the other repairs to his crumbling home, was over six figures, and his neighbours were threatening legal action if he didn't get on with it. He had also recently received letters from another firm of lawyers, threatening him over his father's debts. The old man had obviously lost control of Akerley entirely, although Alex still didn't know the full extent of the problem.

He took a deep breath and tried to fend off his father's jab. 'Well, I'm working on it. I've got some quotes—'

'Working on it! What does that mean?'

'It means I'm not there yet but I will be.'

'Working on it, Alex, always working on it,' Sir Nicholas chuckled with derision. 'You see, you need to be a bit more bloody decisive, like me.'

'Hmm,' Alex muttered.

'Now look, the dry rot is getting very bad in the north wing here, lot of the roof timbers are about to go. Seeing as you're just back from Africa and flush with funds I expect that you can fork out a bit to help keep the place running.'

'Dad, I need to get Bradbourne sorted out first.'

'Bugger Bradbourne, child! What about looking after your alma mater!' This was a well-worn argument. His father knew that the family pile was no longer sustainable since he had sold off most of the

farmland around it, but had made it his cantankerous cause célèbre to die in the house he was born in.

Alex's jaw tightened. He stood up and began pacing back and forth in the living room. He pressed the receiver hard against his head and his dark brows drew together.

'Look, let's just get to the point here, Dad. We *need* to sell Akerley. Without the land the house is just a liability – we're living in the ruins of our history. We can't go on as if we're . . .' he raised his free hand in exasperation, '. . . in the Middle Ages or something. You know we—'

'And you know damn well that I never will, so don't you start that cant again! If you were earning some decent bloody money as a colonel, instead of pissing around with nignogs in the bush, you might actually be able to start putting something back into this family!'

Alex stopped pacing; his shoulders heaved and he put his head down, his eyes closed, as he summoned up all his strength not to retaliate.

With forced calm he said: 'I am trying my best, Dad.'

'Trying won't do, Alexander! If you weren't such a fucking failure the family wouldn't be in this bloody mess!'

'I am *not a fucking failure*!' His voice cracked into a shout of rage.

Provoked.

Exposed.

Defeated,

Humiliated.

He had failed.

He had been drawn into an argument, allowing his father to score the petty victory he had been looking for to make himself feel better.

Alex slammed the phone down but he could hear the braying, triumphant laugh all the way from Herefordshire. His father's uncanny ability to zero in on his weakness had worked yet again.

Alex was shaking with anger as he walked to the back of the living room and stood with his hands on his hips, staring out of the window at the overgrown back garden. He did not see or hear anything else as the scene played itself over in his head.

Murderous fury consumed half of him; the rest was simply crushed by his father's scorn and his own fear of what he was.

I am *not a fucking failure*!

The phone rang again.

He stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment and then snatched it off the cradle and barked, 'Yes!'

'Mr Devereux?' asked a voice in a concerned tone.

Alex could not place the accent exactly, something Middle Eastern but with an American overtone.

He forced himself to sound more civil. 'Yes, this is Alexander Devereux.'

'My name is Mr Al-Khouri. I represent an organisation that is interested in doing some business with you, Mr Devereux.'

'Yes?' Alex replied cautiously.

'I realise that you cannot talk on the phone but I would be interested to meet you tomorrow to outline a project.'

'Right,' Alex managed.

'I have booked a table for tea at the Ritz at three o'clock tomorrow. Would that be acceptable?'

'Fine . . .' Alex said slowly, avoiding commitment as he desperately tried to think if he wanted to go. He knew he did not have any alternative, and the Ritz was about as unthreatening a place as one could meet in.

'Very well, Mr Devereux. Just ask for my table, Mr Al-Khouri, and it's jacket and tie,' he said in a smug tone.

'Right, OK. Thank you,' Alex tried to end the conversation sounding as if he was in control.

As usual, Alex arrived early; army habits died hard.

He was wearing highly polished black Oxfords, his bespoke blue pinstripe suit with a crisply ironed white shirt, and his Cavalry and Guards blue and red striped tie.

He didn't like being so obvious about his regiment – 'cabbage' was their derisory term for flaunting the connection too overtly – but this was

business, and he knew it was one of the few British army symbols that foreigners in his line of work recognised and valued.

He walked up the side entrance steps on Arlington Street and was greeted by a smartly uniformed porter with white gloves tucked into one of the epaulettes of his overcoat.

He was shown along the broad entrance hall by an overly suave waiter in black tie and a white dinner jacket. The middle of the Palm Court tearoom was dominated by an enormous gilt urn decorated with palms. A lady in a sequined dress tinkled away at a piano on one side.

Alex cringed; the whole effect was one of stifling fussiness. The sparse clientele included grandmothers being taken out on their birthdays, aspirational fathers fulfilling their dreams by bringing cowed wives and children out for tea at the Ritz. Conversation was reduced to a subdued level by the formality.

'Mr Al-Khouri is over there, sir,' said the officious waiter, his arm extended grandly to point to a table in the far corner of the room. Alex straightened his shoulders and walked over slowly, eyeing his potential business partner carefully.

On first sight Mr Al-Khouri looked the epitome of a wealthy playboy: about thirty-five, blow-dried black hair, average height, slim build and clean-shaven. He was wearing a white shirt with a black Armani suit and tie.