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CROSSFIRE

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Crossfire
by
Dick Francis and Felix Francis

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Prologue

*Helmand Province, Afghanistan,
October 2009*

‘Medic! Medic!’

I could see that my platoon sergeant was shouting but, strangely, the sound of his voice seemed muffled, as if I was in a neighbouring room rather than out here in the open.

I was lying on the dusty ground with my back up against a low bank so that I was actually half sitting. Sergeant O’Leary was kneeling beside me on my left.

‘Medic!’ he shouted again urgently, over his shoulder.

He turned his head and looked me in the eye.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ he asked.

‘What happened?’ I said, my own voice sounding loud in my head.

‘A bloody IED,’ he said. He turned away, looked behind him, and shouted again. ‘Where’s that fucking medic?’

An IED. I knew that I should have known what IED meant but my brain seemed to be working in slow motion. I finally remembered. IED – Improvised Explosive Device – a roadside bomb.

The sergeant was talking loudly into his personal radio.

‘Alpha four,’ he said in a rush. ‘This is Charlie six three. IED, IED. One CAT A, several CAT C. Request IRT immediate backup and casevac. Over.’

I couldn’t hear any response, if there was one. I seemed to have lost my radio headset, along with my helmet.

CAT A, he’d said. CAT A was army speak for a seriously injured soldier requiring immediate medical help to prevent loss of life. CAT Cs were walking wounded.

The sergeant turned back to me.

‘You still all right, sir?’ he asked, the stress apparent in his face.

‘Yes,’ I said, but, in truth, I didn’t really feel that great. I was cold, yet sweaty. ‘How are the men?’ I asked him.

‘Don’t worry about the men, sir,’ he said. ‘I’ll look after the men.’

‘How many are injured?’ I asked.

‘A few. Minor, mostly,’ he said. ‘Just some cuts and a touch of deafness from the blast.’ I knew what he meant. The sergeant turned away and shouted at the desert-camouflaged figure nearest to him. ‘Johnson, go and fetch the bloody medic kit from Cummings. The little rat’s too shit-scared to move.’

He turned back to me once more.

‘Won’t be long now, sir.’

‘You said on the radio there’s a CAT A. Who is it?’

He looked into my face.

‘You, sir,’ he said.

‘Me?’

‘The CAT A is you, sir,’ he said again. ‘Your fucking foot’s been blown off.’

I

Four Months Later

I realized as soon as I walked out of the hospital that I had nowhere to go.

I stood holding my bag at the side of the road, watching a line of passengers board a red London bus.

Should I join them, I wondered. But where were they going?

Simply being discharged from National Health Service care had been my overriding aim for weeks without any thought or reason as to what was to come next. I was like a man released from prison who stands outside the gates gulping down great breaths of fresh, free air without a care for the future. Freedom was what mattered, not the nature of it.

And I had been incarcerated in my own prison, a hospital prison.

I suppose, looking back, I had to admit that it had passed quite quickly. But, at the time, every hour, even every minute, had dragged interminably. Progress, seen day-by-day, had been painfully slow, with painful being the appropriate word. However, I was now able to walk reasonably well on an artificial foot and, whereas I wouldn't be playing football again for a while, if ever, I could climb up and down stairs unaided and was mostly self-sufficient. I might even have been able to run a few strides to catch that bus, if only I had wanted to go wherever it was bound.

I looked around me. No one had turned up to collect me, nor had I expected them to. None of my family actually knew I was being discharged on that particular Saturday morning and, quite likely, they would not have turned up even if they had.

I had always preferred to do things for myself, and they knew it.

As far as my family was concerned, I was a loner, and happier for it, perhaps the more so after having to rely for months on others for help with my personal, and private, bodily functions.

I wasn't sure who had been the more shocked, my mother or me, when a nurse had asked, during one of her rare visits, if she could help me get dressed. My mother had last seen me naked when I was about seven and she was more than a little flustered at the prospect of doing so again twenty-five years later. She'd suddenly remembered that she was late for an appointment elsewhere, and had rushed away. The memory of her discomfort had kept me smiling for most of the rest of that day, and I hadn't smiled much recently.

In truth, 25 198241 Captain Thomas Vincent Forsyth had not been the most patient of patients.

The army had been my life since the night I had left home after another particularly unpleasant, but not uncommon, argument with my stepfather. I had slept uncomfortably on the steps of the army recruiting office in Oxford and, when the office opened at 9 a.m. the following morning, I had walked in and signed on for Queen and Country as a private soldier in the Grenadier Guards.

Guardsmen Forsyth had taken to service life like the proverbial duck to water and had risen through the ranks, first to corporal, then to officer cadet at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst followed by a commission back in my old regiment. The army had been much more to me than just a job; it had been my wife, my friend, and my family; it had been all I had known for fifteen years, and I loved it. But now it appeared that

my army career might be over, blown apart for ever by an Afghan IED.

Consequently, I had not been a happy bunny during the previous four months, and it had showed.

In fact, I was an angry young man.

I turned left out of the hospital gates and began walking. Perhaps, I thought, I would see where I had got to by the time I became too tired to continue.

‘Tom,’ shouted a female voice. ‘Tom.’

I stopped and turned round.

Vicki, one of the physiotherapists from the rehabilitation centre, was in her car turning out of the hospital car park. She had the passenger window down.

‘Do you need a lift?’ she asked.

‘Where are you going?’ I said.

‘I was going to Hammersmith,’ she said. ‘But I can take you somewhere else if you like.’

‘Hammersmith would be fine.’

I threw my bag onto the back seat and climbed in beside her.

‘So they’ve let you out, then?’ she said while turning into the line of traffic on Roehampton Lane.

‘Glad to see the back of me, I expect,’ I said.

Vicki tactfully didn’t say anything. So it was true.

‘It’s been a very difficult time for you,’ she said eventually. ‘It can’t have been easy.’

I sat in silence. What was she after? An apology?

Of course, it hadn’t been easy.

Losing my foot had, in retrospect, been the most straightforward part. The doctors, first at Camp Bastion in Afghanistan

and then at Selly Oak Hospital in Birmingham, had managed to save the rest of my right leg so that it now finished some seven inches below my knee.

My stump, as all the medical staff insisted on calling it, had healed well and I had quickly become proficient at putting on and taking off my new prosthetic leg, a wonder of steel, leather, and plastic that had turned me from a cripple into a normal-looking human being, at least on the outside.

But there had been other physical injuries too. The roadside bomb had burst my eardrums and had driven Afghan desert dust deep into my torn and bruised lungs, to say nothing of the blast damage and lacerations to the rest of my body. Pulmonary infection and then double pneumonia had then almost finished off what the explosion had failed to do.

The numbing shock that had initially suppressed any feeling of hurt had soon been replaced by a creeping agony in which every part of me seemed to be on fire. It was just as well that I remembered only a smattering of the full casualty evacuation procedure. Heavy doses of morphine did more than inhibit the pain receptors in the brain, they slowed its very activity down to bare essentials such as maintaining breathing and the pumping of the heart.

The human body, however, is a wondrous creation and has an amazing ability to mend itself. My ears recovered, the lacerations healed, and my white blood cells slowly won the war against my chest infection, with a little help and reinforcement from some high-powered intravenous antibiotics.

If only the body could grow a new foot.

The mental injuries, however, were proving less easy to spot and far more difficult to repair.

‘Where in Hammersmith do you want?’ Vicki asked, bringing me back to reality from my daydreaming.

‘Anywhere will do,’ I said.

‘But do you live in Hammersmith?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘So where do you live?’

Now that was a good question. I suppose that I was technically, and manifestly, homeless.

For the past fifteen years I had lived in army accommodation of one form or another: barracks, Sandhurst, officers’ messes, tents and bivouacs, even in the backs of trucks or the cramped insides of Warrior armoured cars. I had slept in, under, and on top of Land Rovers and, more often than I cared to remember, I had slept where I sat or lay on the ground, half an ear open for the call of a sentry or the sound of an approaching enemy.

However, the army had now sent me ‘home’ for six months.

The major from the Ministry of Defence, the Wounded Personnel Liaison Officer, had been fair but firm during his recent visit. ‘Six months’ leave on full pay,’ he’d said. ‘To recover. To sort yourself out. Then we’ll see.’

‘I don’t need six months,’ I’d insisted. ‘I’ll be ready to go back in half that time.’

‘Back?’ he’d asked.

‘To my regiment.’

‘We’ll see,’ he had repeated.

‘What do you mean, we’ll see?’ I had demanded.

‘I’m not sure that going back to your regiment will be possible,’ he’d said.

‘Where, then?’ I’d asked, but I’d read the answer in his face before he’d said it.

‘You might be more suited to a civilian job. You wouldn’t be passed fit for combat. Not without a foot.’

The major and I had been sitting in the reception area of the Douglas Bader Rehabilitation Centre in Queen Mary’s Hospital in Roehampton, London.

Part of Headley Court, the military’s own state-of-the-art

rehab centre in Surrey, had been temporarily closed for refurbishment, and the remaining wards had been overwhelmed by the numbers of wounded with missing limbs. Hence I had been sent to Queen Mary's and the National Health.

It was testament to the remarkable abilities of the military Incident Response Teams, and to their amazingly well-equipped casevac helicopters, that so many soldiers with battlefield injuries, which would in the past have invariably proved fatal, were now routinely dealt with and survived. Double and even triple traumatic amputees often lived when, only recently, they would have surely bled to death before medical help could arrive.

But not for the first time I'd wondered if it would have been better if I had died. Losing a foot had sometimes seemed to me a worse outcome than losing my life. But I had looked up at the painting on the wall of Douglas Bader, the Second World War pilot after whom the rehabilitation centre was named, and it had given me strength.

'Douglas Bader was passed fit for combat,' I'd said.

The major had looked up at me. 'Eh?'

'Douglas Bader was passed fit to fight and he'd lost *both* his feet.'

'Things were different then,' the major had replied, somewhat flippantly.

Were they? I wondered.

Bader had been declared fit and had taken to the air in his Spitfire to fight the enemy simply due to his own perseverance. True, the country had been in desperate need of pilots but he could have easily sat out the war in relative safety if he had wanted to. It was his huge personal determination to fly that had overcome the official reluctance to allow it.

I would now take my lead from him.

We'll see, indeed.

I'd show them.

‘Will the Tube station do?’ Vicki said.

‘Sorry?’ I said.

‘The Tube station,’ she repeated. ‘Is that OK?’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Anywhere.’

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘Home, I suppose,’ I said.

‘And where is home?’

‘My mother lives in Lambourn,’ I said.

‘Where’s that?’ she asked.

‘Near Newbury, in Berkshire.’

‘Is that where you’re going now?’

Was it? I didn’t particularly want to. But where else? I could hardly sleep on the streets of London. Others did, but had I gone down that far?

‘Probably,’ I said. ‘I’ll get the train.’

My mind was working on automatic pilot as I negotiated the escalator up from the Underground into Paddington mainline railway station. Only near the top did I realize that I couldn’t remember when I had last used an escalator. Stairs had always been my choice and they had to be taken at the run, never at a walk. And yet here I was, gliding serenely up without moving a muscle.

Fitness had always been a major obsession in a life that was full of obsessions.

Even as a teenager I had been mad about being fit. I had run every morning on the hills above Lambourn, trying to beat the horses as they chased me along the lush grass training gallops.

Army life, especially that of the infantry officer at war, was a strange mix of lengthy, boring interludes punctuated by brief but intensely high-adrenalin episodes where the separation between living and dying could be rice-paper thin. With the

episode over, if one was still alive and intact, the boredom would recommence until the next ‘contact’ broke the spell once more.

I had always used the boring times to work on my fitness, constantly trying to break my own record for the number of sit-ups, or push-ups, or pull-ups, or anythingelse-ups I could think of, all within a five-minute period. What the Taliban had thought of their enemy chinning it up and down in full body armour, plus rifle and helmet, on an improvised bar welded across the back of a Snatch Land Rover is anyone’s guess, but I had been shot at twice while trying to break the battalion record, once when I was on track to succeed. The Taliban obviously had no sense of sport, or of timing.

But now look at me: taking the escalator, and placing my bag on the moving stairway while doing so. Months of sedentary hospital life had left my muscles weak, flabby, and lacking any sort of condition. I clearly had much to do before I had any hope of convincing the major from the MOD that I could be ‘combat-ready’ once more.

I stood at the bottom of the steep driveway to my mother’s home and experienced the same reluctance to go up that I had so often felt in the past.

I had taken a taxi from Newbury station to Lambourn, purposely asking the driver to drop me some way along the road from my mother’s gate so that I could walk the last hundred yards.

It was force of habit, I suppose. I felt happier approaching anywhere on foot. It must have been something to do with being in the infantry. On foot, I could hear the sounds that vehicle engines would drown out, and smell the scents that exhaust fumes would smother. And I could get a proper feel of the lie of the land, essential to anticipate an ambush.

I shook my head and smiled at my folly.

There was unlikely to be a Taliban ambush in a Berkshire village, but I could recall the words of my platoon colour sergeant at Sandhurst: ‘You can never be too careful,’ he would say. ‘Never assume anything, always check.’

No shots rang out, no IEDs went bang, and no turban-headed Afghan tribesmen sprang out with raised Kalashnikovs as I safely negotiated the climb up from the road to the house, a red-brick and flint affair built sometime back between the world wars.

As usual, in the middle of the day, all was quiet as I wandered round the side of the house towards the back door. A few equine residents put their heads out of their boxes in the nearest stable yard as I crunched across the gravel, inquisitive as ever to see a new arrival.

My mother was out.

I knew she would be. That was why I hadn’t phoned ahead to say I was coming. Perhaps I needed to be here alone first, to get used to the idea of being back; to have a moment of recollection and renewal before the whirlwind of energy that was my mother swept through and took away any chance I might have of changing my mind.

My mother was a racehorse trainer. But she was much more than just that. She was a phenomenon. In a sport where there were plenty of big egos, my mother had the biggest ego of them all. She did, however, have some justification for her high sense of worth. In just her fifth year in the sport, she had been the first lady to be crowned Champion Jump Trainer, a feat she had repeated for each of the next six seasons.

Her horses had won three Cheltenham Gold Cups and two Grand Nationals and she was rightly recognized as the ‘first lady of British racing’.

She was also a highly opinionated anti-feminist, a workaholic

and no sufferer of fools or knaves. If she had been Prime Minister she would have probably brought back both hanging and the birch, and she was not averse to saying so loudly, and at length, whenever she had the opportunity. Her politics made Genghis Khan seem like an indecisive liberal, but everybody loved her nevertheless. She was a ‘character’.

Everyone, that is, except her ex-husbands and her children.

For about the twentieth time that morning, I asked myself why I had come here. There had to be somewhere else I could go. But I knew there wasn’t.

My only friends were in the army, mostly in my regiment, and they were still out in Afghanistan for another five weeks. And, anyway, I wasn’t ready to see them. Not yet. They would remind me too much of what I was no longer – and I wouldn’t be able to stand their pity.

I suppose I could have booked myself into an army officers’ mess. No doubt I would have been made welcome at Wellington Barracks, the Grenadiers’ home base in London. But what would I have done there?

What could I do anywhere?

Once again I thought it might have been better if the IED explosion, or the pneumonia, had completed the task: Union Flag-draped coffin, firing of volleys in salute, and I’d be six feet under by now and be done with it all. Instead, I was outside my mother’s back door struggling with a damned artificial foot to get down low enough to find the key that she habitually left under a stone in the flower bed.

And for what?

To get into a house I hated; to stay with a parent I despised. To say nothing of my stepfather, to whom I had hardly spoken a civil word since I had walked out of here, aged seventeen.

I couldn’t find the damn key. Perhaps my mother had become more security minded over the years. There had been a time

when she would have left the house unlocked completely. I tried the handle. Not any more.

I sat down on the doorstep and leaned back against the locked door.

My mother would be home later.

I knew where she was. She was at the races; Cheltenham races, to be precise. I had looked up the runners in the morning paper, as I always did. She had four horses declared, including the favourite in the big race, and my mother would never miss a day at her beloved Cheltenham, the scene of her greatest triumphs. And, while today's might be a smaller meeting than the steeplechase Festival in March, I could visualize her holding court in the parade ring before the races, and welcoming the winner back after them. I had seen it so often. It had been my childhood.

The sun had long before given up trying to break through the veil of cloud, and it was beginning to get cold. I sighed. At least the toes on my right foot wouldn't get chilblains. I put my head back against the wood and rested my eyes.

'Can I help you?' said a voice.

I reopened my eyes. A short man in his mid-thirties wearing faded jeans and a puffy anorak stood on the gravel in front of me. I silently remonstrated with myself. I must have briefly drifted off to sleep because I hadn't heard him coming. What would my sergeant have said?

'I'm waiting for Mrs Kauri,' I said.

Mrs Kauri was my mother, Mrs Josephine Kauri, although Josephine had not been the name with which she had been christened. It was her name of choice. Sometime back, long before I was born, she had obviously decided that Jane, her real name, was not classy enough for her. Kauri was not her proper name either. It had been the surname of her first husband, and she was now on her third.

‘Mrs Kauri is at the races,’ replied the man.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’ll just wait for her here.’

‘She won’t be back for hours, not until after dark.’

‘I’ll wait,’ I said. ‘I’m her son.’

‘The soldier?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, somewhat surprised that he would know.

But he did know. It was only fleeting but I didn’t miss his glance down at my right foot. He knew only too well.

‘I’m Mrs Kauri’s head lad,’ he said. ‘Ian Norland.’

He held out a hand and I used it to help me up.

‘Tom,’ I said. ‘Tom Forsyth. What happened to old Basil?’

‘He retired. I’ve been here three years now.’

‘It’s been a while longer than that since I’ve been here,’ I said.

He nodded. ‘I saw you from the window of my flat,’ Ian said pointing to a row of windows above the stable boxes. ‘Would you like to come in and watch the racing on the telly? It’s too bloody cold to wait out here.’

‘I’d love to.’

We climbed the stairs to what I remembered had once been a storage loft over the stables.

‘The horses provide great central heating,’ Ian said over his shoulder as he led the way. ‘I never have to turn the boiler on until it actually freezes outside.’

The narrow stairway opened out into a long open-plan living area with a kitchen at the near end and doors at the far that presumably led to bedroom and bathroom beyond. There was no sign of any Mrs Norland, and the place had a ‘man look’ about it, with stacked-up dishes in the sink and newspapers spread over much of the floor.

‘Take a pew,’ Ian said waving a hand at a brown corduroy-covered sofa placed in front of a huge plasma television. ‘Fancy a beer?’

‘Sure,’ I said. I’d not had a beer in more than five months.

Ian went to a fridge which appeared to contain nothing but beers. He tossed me a can.

We sat in easy companionship on the brown sofa watching the racing from Cheltenham on the box. My mother’s horse won the second race and Ian punched the air in delight.

‘Good young novice, that,’ Ian said. ‘Strong quarters. He’ll make a good chaser in time.’

He took pleasure in the success of his charges as I had done in the progress of a guardsman from raw recruit into battle-hardened warrior, a man who could then be trusted with one’s life.

‘Now for the big one,’ Ian said. ‘Pharmacist should win. He’s frightened off most of the opposition.’

‘Pharmacist?’ I asked.

‘Our Gold Cup hope,’ he said in a tone that implied I should have known. ‘This is his last warm-up for the Festival. He loves Cheltenham.’

‘What do you mean, he’s frightened off the opposition?’ I asked.

‘Mrs Kauri’s been saying all along that old Pharm will run in this race and so the other Gold Cup big guns have gone elsewhere. Not good for them to be beaten today with only a few weeks left to the Festival.’

Ian became more and more nervous, continually getting up and walking round the room for some unnecessary reason or other.

‘Fancy another beer?’ he asked, standing by the fridge.

‘No thanks,’ I said. He’d only given me one two minutes before.

‘God, I hope he wins,’ he said, sitting down and opening a fresh can with another still half full on the table.

‘I thought you said he would,’ I said.

‘He should do, he’s streaks better than the rest, but . . .’

‘But what?’ I asked.

‘Nothing.’ He paused. ‘I just hope nothing strange happens, that’s all.’

‘Do you think something strange might happen?’

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Something bloody strange has been happening to our horses recently.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘Bloody strange things,’ he repeated.

‘Like what?’

‘Like not winning when they should,’ he said. ‘Especially in the big races. Then they come home unwell. You can see it in their eyes. Some have even had diarrhoea, and I’ve never seen racehorses with that before.’

We watched as my mother was shown on the screen tossing the jockey up onto Pharmacist’s back, the black-and-white check silks appearing bright against the dull green of the February grass. My stepfather stood nearby observing events, as he always did.

‘God, I hope he’s OK,’ said Ian with a nervous rattle.

The horse looked fine to me, but how would I know? The last horse I’d been close to had been an Afghan tribesman’s nag with half of one ear shot away, reportedly by its owner as he was trying to shoot and charge at the same time. I tactfully hadn’t asked him which side he’d been shooting at. Afghani allegiance was variable. It depended on who was paying, and how much.

Ian became more and more nervous as the race time approached.

‘Calm down,’ I said. ‘You’ll give yourself a heart attack.’

‘I should have gone,’ he said. ‘I knew I should have gone.’

‘Gone where?’

‘To Cheltenham,’ he said.

‘What for?’

‘To keep an eye on the bloody horse, of course,’ he said angrily. ‘To make sure no bugger got close enough to nobble him.’

‘Do you really think the horses are being nobbled?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘The bloody dope tests are all negative.’

We watched as the horses walked round in circles at the start. Then the starter called them into line, and they were off.

‘Come on Pharm, my old boy,’ Ian said, his eyes glued to the television image. He was unable to sit down but stood behind the sofa like a little boy watching some scary science-fiction film, ready to dive down at the first approach of the aliens.

Pharmacist appeared to be galloping along with relative ease in about third place of the eight runners as they passed the grandstand on the first circuit. But only when they started down the hill towards the finishing straight for the last time did the race unfold properly, and the pace pick up.

Pharmacist still seemed to be going quite well and even jumped to the front over the second last. Ian began to breathe a little more easily, but then the horse appeared to fade rapidly, jumping the final fence in a very tired manner and almost coming to a halt on landing. He was easily passed by the others on the run-in up the hill, and he crossed the finishing line in last place, almost walking.

I didn’t know what to say.

‘Oh God,’ said Ian. ‘He can’t run at the Festival, not now.’

Pharmacist certainly did not look like a horse that could win a Gold Cup in six weeks’ time.

Ian stood rigidly behind the sofa, his white-knuckled hands gripping the corduroy fabric to hold himself upright.

‘Bastards,’ he whimpered. ‘I’ll kill the bastards who did this.’

I was not the only angry young man in Lambourn.