EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

The Blood Debt

SOME DEBTS ARE PAID IN BLOOD. SOME ARE PAID IN LOVE.

ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

The Blood Debt

by Alison Reid

Three Years Later…

Alec Cole was leaving early.

A sentence that would have shocked every employee at Cole Security.

For years, Alec had been the first to arrive and the last to leave. Emergencies, international contracts, government clients—it didn't matter. Work got done.

These days, however, there was a six-month-old nursery waiting at home, two cribs assembled weeks ahead of schedule, and a wife who was carrying twins and stubbornly refusing to slow down.

His priorities had shifted.

He shut down his laptop and reached for his suit jacket.

The office door opened without a knock.

Alec didn't even look up.

Detective Derek Samuels stepped inside with a grin. "And there's the daddy-to-be."

Alec sighed.

"Don't start."

"Oh, I'm absolutely starting."

Derek dropped into the chair opposite his desk.

"I just passed three employees in the hallway taking bets."

Alec narrowed his eyes.

"On what?"

"Whether you'll survive the next three weeks."

Alec stared at him.

Derek laughed.

"According to your assistant, you've called Catherine seventeen times today."

"Twelve."

"That's not better."

"She's carrying twins."

"She's pregnant, Alec. Not crossing Afghanistan on foot."

Alec slid his jacket on.

"She texted me this morning saying she felt tired."

Derek blinked.

"She's thirty-six weeks pregnant with twins. I'd be concerned if she wasn't tired."

Alec and Derek stepped out of the office, Alec pulling the door shut behind them. The executive floor was still busy, but for once he wasn't staying to oversee it.

"Leaving already?"

Alec looked up.

Logan Pierce was leaning against a nearby desk, coffee in hand, amusement written all over his face.

"Didn't you leave early yesterday too?"

Alec merely stared at him.

Logan grinned.

"Wow. Fatherhood has ruined you."

Alec continued walking. His phone rang. The moment he saw Catherine's name on the screen, he answered.

"Catherine."

Her voice came through immediately.

"Alec."

Something in her tone made him stop dead. Every instinct he possessed sharpened instantly.

"What's wrong?"

There was a pause.

"I've been having contractions."

The world seemed to narrow.

"What?"

"The doctor checked me this afternoon," Catherine continued, sounding remarkably calm. Far calmer than he felt. "She wants me to come into the hospital."

Alec's heart slammed against his ribs.

"Now?"

"Yes."

His stomach dropped.

"How far apart?"

"About seven minutes."

"Where are you?"

"At home."

"I'm coming."

"Alec—"

"I'm coming."

He ended the call before she could argue. For one heartbeat, he simply stood there. Then he turned.

Logan was still leaning against the desk, and Derek had stopped beside him sometime during the call. Both men were watching Alec with identical expressions.

"What happened?" Logan asked.

Alec grabbed his keys.

"Catherine's in labour."

The coffee slipped from Logan's fingers. Derek froze.

"She's what?"

"I need to get her to the hospital."

Neither man moved. For a moment, they simply stared at him. Then Logan pointed toward the lift.

"Why are you still standing here?"

Alec shot him an impatient look. Logan threw both hands in the air.

"Go, you idiot!"

Alec didn't need to be told twice. He was already striding toward the lift. Behind him he heard Derek's voice.

"Call us when the babies are here."

Alec pressed the elevator button repeatedly. As though somehow that would make it arrive faster. The doors finally opened. He stepped inside.

For the first time in years, the man who had walked into gunfire without hesitation, faced armed criminals without fear, and stared down killers without flinching, felt genuinely terrified.

Not because Catherine was in danger. Not because something was wrong. But because in a matter of hours, he was going to meet his children.

And suddenly nothing in his military training, security career, or entire life felt remotely adequate preparation for becoming a father.

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The private lift doors slid open before Alec could reach them.

He strode into the penthouse at a pace that would have alarmed anyone who knew him.

The overnight hospital bag sat neatly beside the lift doors, exactly where Catherine would have left it. Organised. Prepared. Ready.

His gaze found her instantly.

She was sitting on the sofa, one hand braced against the cushion beside her and the other resting protectively over the enormous curve of her stomach.

And she was clearly in pain.

"Catherine."

Her head lifted. Despite the discomfort etched across her features, she managed a small smile.

"Hi."

Alec crossed the room in seconds.

"What happened?"

She let out a soft laugh.

"The babies happened."

Another contraction hit. The smile vanished immediately. Her eyes squeezed shut and her entire body tensed.

Alec dropped to his knees in front of her.

"Jesus Christ."

His hand found hers instantly.

“Catherine.”

She gripped his fingers so hard it should have hurt. It didn’t. Nothing mattered except her. The contraction rolled through her, stealing her breath. A soft sound escaped her throat.

Alec felt something cold settle in his chest. He had seen men bleeding out. Seen explosions. Seen death. None of it compared to watching the woman he loved suffer.

The contraction finally eased. Catherine exhaled slowly and opened her eyes. Immediately she found Alec staring at her. His expression was tight with concern.

“I’m okay.”

“You don’t look okay.”

Another small laugh.

“I’m in labour, Alec. Looking okay isn’t really the goal.”

His jaw tightened.

“How long have these been happening?”

“Most of the afternoon.”

His eyes widened.

“Most of the afternoon?”

“I didn’t want to overreact.”

Alec stared at her. Then stared harder.

“Overreact?”

“Alec—”

“You’ve been having contractions for hours and didn’t call me?”

The outrage in his voice was so genuine that Catherine couldn’t help smiling.

“There he is.”

“There who is?”

“My ridiculously overprotective husband.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

She squeezed his hand.

“Alec, we’re fine.”

His gaze immediately dropped to her stomach. The twins shifted beneath her skin. His expression softened for a brief moment. Then another contraction hit. Catherine’s fingers tightened around his. The softness vanished instantly.

“That’s it,” he muttered, rising to his feet.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re leaving.”

“Alec—”

“We’re leaving now.”

She laughed despite herself.

“The babies aren’t arriving this second.”

He grabbed the hospital bag.

“How do you know?”

“Alec.”

“What if one of them decides they’re impatient?”

“They’re your children,” Catherine said dryly. “Of course they’re impatient.”

He pointed toward the lift.

“Hospital. Now.”

Catherine slowly pushed herself upright. The movement alone looked uncomfortable. Alec was beside her immediately. One arm wrapped securely around her waist while the other settled protectively over her stomach.

His touch was careful. Reverent. As though she carried something infinitely precious. Which she did. The babies kicked again. Alec froze. His eyes widened.

"Did you feel that?"

Catherine rolled her eyes affectionately.

"They've been doing that for months."

"They know we're going somewhere."

She laughed.

"I think they're just running out of room."

Alec looked horrified by this information.

"Right. Hospital."

"Alec—"

"Now, Catherine."

Still laughing, she allowed him to guide her toward the lift. As the doors opened, she glanced up at him. For all his confidence, all his strength, all his control, she could see it plainly. He was terrified.

Not of danger. Not of threats. Not of anything he had ever faced before. He was terrified because he was about to become a father. And somehow, that made Catherine love him even more.

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The maternity ward was far calmer than Alec thought it should be.

Doctors walked at a normal pace. Nurses smiled. People drank coffee. Meanwhile, Alec felt as though the world was seconds away from ending.

"Alec."

He immediately looked at Catherine.

She sat propped up in the hospital bed, one hand resting on the enormous curve of her stomach. The monitor beside her tracked each contraction, the rhythmic beeping somehow making Alec even more anxious.

"What is it?"

Her lips twitched.

"You've worn a groove in the floor."

Alec glanced down. Apparently, he had been pacing. Again.

"I'm fine."

"You've said that twelve times."

"Because I am."

"You look like you're about to launch a military operation."

His jaw tightened.

"This is more important than any military operation."

Catherine laughed softly. A contraction hit. The amusement disappeared from her face instantly. Alec was beside her before she could draw her next breath. His hand closed around hers.

"Catherine."

She squeezed his fingers.

"I'm okay."

He didn't look convinced. Several moments later the contraction eased.

Before either of them could speak, a knock sounded at the door. A doctor entered, tablet in hand. A warm smile crossed her face.

"Good evening, Catherine."

"Doctor."

The doctor glanced at the monitor before looking back at them.

"Well," she said. "Things have progressed nicely."

Alec immediately straightened.

"What does that mean?"

The doctor smiled.

"It means your babies have decided they're done waiting."

Silence. Alec stared at her. Catherine smiled. The doctor continued.

"Your contractions are stronger and much closer together now. We've examined you and everything looks excellent."

Alec's stomach dropped.

"Excellent?"

"Very excellent."

She smiled directly at Catherine.

"I think we're having these babies tonight."

For a moment nobody spoke. Then Catherine looked at her husband. Alec had gone completely still. His eyes widened slightly.

"You mean..." he began.

The doctor nodded.

"The babies are coming."

Alec blinked. Once. Twice. Then looked at Catherine. The woman he loved. The woman who had survived grief, betrayal, attempted murder, heartbreak, and everything life had thrown at her. The woman carrying his children.

His throat tightened unexpectedly.

"Tonight?"

The doctor smiled.

"Tonight."

Catherine reached for his hand. Alec immediately took it. Her fingers threaded through his.

"You okay?" she asked softly.

A strange sound escaped him. It might have been a laugh. It might have been panic. Even he wasn't entirely sure.

"No."

Catherine laughed. The doctor laughed. Alec looked offended.

"I'm serious."

"I know."

His gaze dropped to her stomach. For months those babies had been kicks beneath his hand. Ultrasound photographs. Names written on nursery walls. Tiny clothes folded neatly into drawers. Abstract. Theoretical. Not real. Not really.

Now they were coming. Tonight. His children. His sons. Or daughters. Or one of each. In a matter of hours, they would be here. Alec swallowed hard. For perhaps the first time in his life, he felt completely out of his depth.

The doctor closed her tablet.

"We'll move Catherine to delivery shortly."

As she headed for the door, she paused.

"Oh—and Mr Cole?"

Alec looked up.

"Try not to look so terrified."

The door closed behind her. Silence filled the room. Then Catherine burst out laughing. Alec stared at her.

"You think this is funny?"

"A little."

He shook his head.

"Catherine."

She squeezed his hand. His expression softened immediately. The laughter faded from her eyes, replaced by something warmer. Something emotional.

"We're having babies."

The simple words settled between them. Alec felt his chest tighten. Three years ago, he had walked into her penthouse convinced she might have been responsible for his brother's death.

Now she was his wife. His home. His future. And she was about to give him the greatest gift anyone ever had. His eyes burned unexpectedly. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss against her forehead.

"I love you."

Catherine smiled.

"I know."

Another contraction hit. Alec immediately straightened.

"Catherine?"

She squeezed his hand hard enough to nearly break it. And Alec couldn't have cared less. The babies were coming. And suddenly nothing in the world had ever mattered more.

* * * * * * * *

The next three hours were the worst of Alec Cole's life.

Not combat. Not the years he'd spent in Special Forces. Not the missions where bullets had flown past his head and death had lurked around every corner. None of it compared. Because this time, there was nothing he could do.

Nothing to fight. Nothing to shoot. Nothing to protect Catherine from. All he could do was stand beside her and watch. And it was destroying him.

Another contraction ripped through her. Catherine cried out. Alec felt it like a physical blow. His grip tightened around her hand.

"I'm here, sweetheart."

Her fingers crushed his. Sweat dampened her brow. Strands of hair clung to her face. Her breathing was uneven and strained. Yet somehow she was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

The strongest too. For three hours he watched her endure pain that seemed impossible. Every instinct inside him screamed to stop it. To take it from her. To carry it himself. But he couldn't. And for perhaps the first time in his life, Alec felt utterly helpless.

The doctor moved into position.

"Okay, Catherine. You're doing wonderfully."

Another contraction surged.

"It's time."

The room shifted instantly. Nurses moved around them. Equipment was adjusted. The doctor looked up.

"Catherine, when the next contraction comes, I need you to push."

Alec brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

"You can do this."

Her eyes found his. Fear. Determination. Love. Everything that made her who she was.

Then the contraction hit. Catherine pushed. A cry tore from her throat.

Alec's heart nearly stopped.

"That's it," the doctor encouraged. "Again."

Catherine pushed harder. Seconds stretched into eternity. Then suddenly—

"I can see the head."

The room seemed to hold its breath. One more push. Then another. And suddenly a tiny cry filled the room. Sharp. Angry. Perfect.

For one stunned second Alec forgot how to breathe.

The doctor lifted a tiny, squirming baby into the air.

"It's a boy."

Alec stared. His son.

His son.

The words echoed through his mind. The baby's cries filled the room. Tiny fists waved furiously. Alec's vision blurred unexpectedly. The nurse quickly wrapped the baby. The tiny face was red and scrunched with outrage.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

"Would you like to cut the cord, Dad?"

Alec looked as though he'd forgotten language. Finally, he nodded. His hands—hands that had never trembled holding a weapon—shook slightly as he accepted the scissors.

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A few moments later the baby was placed against Catherine's chest. Her eyes immediately filled with tears.

"Oh..."

The tiny boy settled instantly against her. Catherine looked up. Alec was staring. Completely captivated. Completely lost.

"He's beautiful," she whispered.

Alec could only nod. Because his throat no longer worked. His son. His family. His entire world.

Then the doctor smiled.

"Don't get too comfortable."

Alec blinked. The doctor laughed softly.

"We still have another baby to deliver."

A look of sheer panic crossed his face.

Catherine actually laughed.

"Alec."

"I forgot."

The entire room laughed.

"You forgot?"

"There was a baby."

"You forgot the second baby?"

"There was a lot happening."

Even Catherine couldn't stop smiling. Several minutes later another contraction arrived. The process began again.

This time Alec knew what was coming. It didn't make it any easier. He stayed beside Catherine. Encouraged her. Held her hand. Reminded her how incredible she was.

And after what felt like both forever and no time at all—another cry echoed through the room. Softer. Higher.

The doctor smiled broadly.

"And here's your daughter."

The world stopped. A tiny baby girl appeared in the doctor's arms. Dark hair. Tiny fingers. Perfect little face.

Alec stared. His daughter. His beautiful little girl. The nurse wrapped her carefully before placing her beside her brother against Catherine's chest. For a long moment nobody spoke.

Catherine looked down at the two tiny lives resting against her. Tears streamed silently down her cheeks.

Alec dropped into the chair beside the bed. His gaze moved between them. His wife. His son. His daughter. His family. Everything he'd never believed he would have. Everything he'd never dared dream of.

Catherine looked up at him. Their eyes met. Alec reached for her hand. His voice was rough with emotion.

"You gave me everything."

Fresh tears filled Catherine's eyes.

"No."

She glanced down at the babies before looking back at him.

"We gave each other everything."

Alec leaned forward and kissed her forehead. Then her lips. Then he rested his forehead against hers.

And for the first time in his life, Alec Cole understood something no mission, no success, and no amount of money had ever taught him.

This—his wife in his arms and their children beside them—was what winning felt like.

— The End —

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