

BEGINNINGS

The Prequel to the
Love, Honour, Sacrifice series



R S JEPSON

Chapter 1

Hannah could barely breathe with the hand over her mouth. It smelled of sweat and cigarettes. She struggled in panic and disbelief at what was happening. She kicked out with her knee and found the spot. Steve yelled out, rolled off her, and squirmed around on the floor grasping his crotch.

Tears streamed down her face. "You bastard!"

She picked up her coat and stormed out of his room.

His mother noticed her as she made for the front door. "Hannah, are you okay?"

"Sod off!" she scolded.

Hannah has been dating Steve for a few months and they got on well. He made her laugh and was kind and generous, but there was something else lying beneath the surface, something less pleasant. His bravado often became excessive, turning to cocky over-confidence.

This evening it had gone one step further. After some heavy petting, he wanted more and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. He forced himself on her, and despite her resistance, she believed she was about to be raped in his parent's house.

By the time she got home, her emotions had settled down; no harm had been done. She opened a can of Coke and threw her college bags into her room.

Her mother came in an hour later and could see something was wrong.

"Hey honey, is everything alright?"

Hannah told her what Steve had done, or tried to do, and tears flowed again.

Her mother consoled her.

The following evening the telephone rang, "Hannah, it's for you."

Hannah took the receiver, "Hello?"

"Hi Hannah, it's Steve."

"What the hell do you want?"

"To say sorry, that's all."

"Too late. I never want to see or speak to you again."

"But, Hannah ..."

She slammed the phone down. "Bastard!"

Within a few days, Hannah got over the whole incident. She never spoke to Steve again and heard nothing more about him for many years.

Mike was standing at the counter of a bar in central Glasgow when the room went quiet. At least it did in his mind. He had just laughed at a joke from a colleague and finished a pint of beer when he turned and saw a face. He could never relate what he felt at that moment, but it changed his world.

He ordered a round of drinks for his mates and then excused himself.

He wandered over to a table where half a dozen girls sat, though only one interested him. Her face had captivated him. She was stunning. He wasn't the most forward young man with girls, but he felt driven by a force outside himself.

He had to try.

Hannah's eyes locked briefly on Mike's as he stood at the bar. A tingle ran down her spine and her heart raced for a moment.

She turned to her friend. "Mandy, have you seen the guy at the bar? He's drop-dead-gorgeous."

"Too right!"

Her other friends had spotted him too, after seeing Hannah's face.

"What a dish!" said Dawn.

"He could have me anytime," said Jenny.

"Who couldn't," said Mandy. "You're easy."

They all laughed.

"Oh, my god!" said Dawn. "He's heading this way!"

Hannah watched him approach. Surely it would be too much to ask. That he was interested in her?

But it was only her he had looked at.

He carried himself well and was dressed smartly in jeans, a polo shirt, and clean shoes. He was stocky, though obviously with muscle, not fat. And his face! It was tough yet boyish, and his eyes sparkled, lighting up a subtle smile on his face. Her pulse quickened again.

"He's looking at you again," said Dawn. "I think it's you he wants, Han. Make room for him if you know what's good for you."

Hannah's head was spinning. There was a spare stool on a table next to theirs and close to hers. She discretely shifted her stool closer to Mandy, leaving a space on one side of her.

Mandy touched her arm, "play it cool."

The guy reached the table. He seemed a little unsure of himself for a moment, then spoke.

“Evening ladies.”

Then he looked at Hannah.

“Hi, I’m Mike.” He almost stammered but held himself together. “I saw you from across the bar, and just wanted to say how beautiful you are.”

Hannah was lost for words. His eyes bore into her and touched her heart. Her mouth felt dry and she was trembling slightly. Time slowed down as she tried to compose herself.

Eventually, she said, “hi, I’m Hannah.”

Her words came out as a whisper.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

Mandy tapped her arm as if saying ‘go on!’.

“Hannah.”

This time her voice was clear.

“Good to meet you, Hannah. Do you mind if I sit down?”

“N... no, go ahead.”

As Mike turned to pull up the spare stool, she glanced at her friends. They were goggle-eyed or had their mouths hanging open.

It was soon clear to all. His attention was only for Hannah.

They made small talk, though Mike was still hesitant as her friends surrounded Hannah. He looked around and saw an empty table. He felt like he was taking his life in his hands as he plucked up the courage to go a step further.

“Hey, we could move to the table over there, so we can talk easier.”

Hannah glanced in the direction he had indicated and saw one of her friends give her a sign of encouragement.

“Okay,” said Hannah.

They sat down in their new position and Mike relaxed a little.

“I hope you don’t mind me taking you away from your friends?”

“No,” said Hannah. “You’ve left yours too.”

She gave him a smile which thrilled him. He yearned to touch her, just to hold her hand.

“They’ll be fine without me. It’s not every day they see a pal go after a gorgeous girl.”

Hannah blushed and then giggled.

That giggle caused butterflies in his stomach and made his legs feel weak; he was sure he would have had to steady himself if he were standing.

Her impish face beguiled him, and though still stunned by her attractiveness, he was relaxing even more. As the conversation flowed, he felt he was talking to an old friend.

Hannah relaxed too. This guy was so confident, but with no hint of bravado. She could tell, somehow, there were no pretences. He was just being himself. She thought of Steve, how different they were. Steve had a course and crass edge, but there was none of that in Mike. Steve had been her first and only boyfriend. Boyfriend? Am I already thinking that?

She immediately warmed to Mike despite her first-moment nerves. They made each other laugh, and he said how he loved the sound she made when she giggled. She felt transported to another place and didn't want this night to end.

They finished their drinks and Mike offered another.

"Sure, I'll have a white wine, please."

Mike moved to the bar and she turned to look at her friends. They were giving thumbs-up signs and mouthing encouragement. She could also detect a touch of friendly jealousy.

She composed herself after having been swept off her feet so suddenly.

Mike headed back with the drinks, and she studied him. He moved with grace and held himself tall and erect; she wanted to find out more about him.

He sat down and handed her the wine.

"Thanks. So, what do you do?" Mike said.

He had pre-empted her question.

"I'm at college, doing business studies."

"What are you going to do when you finish?"

"Not sure on that one. But if I can find the finances, I'd like to run a flower shop. Horticulture is one of my passions. How about you?"

"I'm in the Army. Joined a year ago."

"Oh." Hannah had mixed feelings about that. Then she realised that once again, with this guy she had only just met, she was thinking long term. But the Army, that conjured up ideas of a lot of time apart, and potential danger. Many couples did it, though. She kicked herself back into the moment. Just see where it goes.

“Where are you based?”

“Glencorse Barracks, just outside Edinburgh. I’m in the Royal Scottish Regiment.”

“Good for you.”

“You’re a nationalist?”

“Not as such, but I think it’s good for a Scotsman to be in a Scottish Regiment.”

“My sentiment too.”

They finished their drinks and Mike took stock. They were getting on so well and more alcohol would dull his senses.

“Say, how about a change of scenery? There’s a nice late-night coffee shop around the corner.”

“Sure, that would be good.”

“Come on then, let’s go.”

Both waved to their respective friends as they left.

Mike felt the envy of his colleagues.

They walked out of the bar into a cool evening.

It’s now or never. Mike reached for Hannah’s hand, her fingers curled around his, giving a slight squeeze. He smiled to himself, and thought, yes! His heart soared.

He revelled in Hannah’s company and her in his. They spent hours in the coffee shop, until it was closing time, 2 a.m.

“I think we’d better call it a night”

“Goodness! Is that the time?” said Hannah.

“I’m sorry, I’ve kept you out rather late.”

“No apologies, I’ve enjoyed it.”

“You have?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I’ll get us a cab and run you home first.”

“Are you sure? It’ll make a long journey for you.”

“No problem.”

They held hands all the way to Hannah’s parents’ house, and Mike’s heart sank at the thought of this magical night ending.

All too soon, they reached her street.

Mike told the driver to wait while he escorted Hannah to the door.

“I’d like to see you again, soon.”

“Me too,” said Hannah.

“I’m off for the weekend, I get most weekends off at the moment. Tomorrow, how about some bowling then eat?”

“Sounds good, I’m free after five.”

“Great! The War Memorial at five, then.”

“Yes, definitely.”

Mike wrapped his arms around her and bent his head to kiss her. There was no resistance. He felt her melt into his embrace.

After saying goodnight, Hannah stretched up for another kiss. She wanted to make sure it was real. She had never been kissed like that, but then she had little to go on other than Steve’s slobbering.

Her lips parted to his gently probing tongue, and hers responded in kind. They became more passionate, but both knew they must part.

As Mike said goodnight again and turned away, she felt a sudden emptiness and a yearning for something more.

She watched him get into the cab, wave; and then he was gone.

She was ecstatic about the evening and yet numb now it was over, Mike continued the journey home with nothing on his mind except Hannah.

“I thought you weren’t going to put her down,” said the driver.

“Believe me, pal, I didn’t want to.”

“You just met her tonight.”

“Yep. She’s amazing.”

“Good luck to you, pal.”

“Thanks.”

Mike saw nothing on the way home, only Hannah’s face in his mind.

As soon as he got to his bedroom, he stripped off and crashed out. But little sleep came.

Chapter 2

Mike and Hannah got together for a session of bowling on Saturday afternoon. They were well matched and she won a similar number of frames to his score, but she had a competitive nature which excited him further.

She was full of life and energy. When she made a strike, which she achieved several times, she squealed with joy and then giggled in the same intoxicating way she did the day before. He realised he was already besotted with her. One word summed her up at that moment, delightful. Her face beamed with an almost permanent smile, her eyes sparkled, and she regularly touched his shoulder or stroked his neck while looking into his eyes.

Mike had never felt so alive.

When their time was up, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“That was so much fun!”

The taste of her lips sent what felt like a bolt of electricity through him, and he wanted more. But he was too much of a gentleman to get over-passionate in public, and he had learned patience.

“I’m glad.” He kissed her back and found her mouth willing and full of desire. He struggled to hold back. “Something to eat then?”

“Yes please, that has made me hungry.”

“Any preference? Chinese, Indian, Italian?”

“Oh, anything, you decide.”

“Right, Indian it is then, my favourite.”

They left the bowling alley for the short walk to the restaurant. It was a warm late summer evening, so Mike suggested they go through the park. Hannah reached for Mike’s hand and a warm flush went through her when he responded, and his fingers curled around hers. His hand was huge compared to hers, and strong, but his touch was gentle. He gave her the sensation of security and protection.

Near to the pond, they stopped and Mike suggested they sit for a while on a bench overlooking it. The sun had lowered in the sky, throwing bright colours across the water as some ducks swam in front of them.

She felt an urge, but one that seemed natural, and leaned her head on his shoulder. With only a moment of hesitation, Mike stroked her hair. It was the most sensual thing she had ever experienced when his fingers massaged her scalp.

Her hand moved across his chest and he placed his hand on it.

They sat in that position for many minutes, holding hands, Mike caressing her hair, and her head on his shoulder. The feelings flooded Hannah with contentment. She took in his smell and the feel of his body, for the first time sensing the muscles beneath his shirt.

Gently, he pulled her head up to his and kissed her.

He oozed sexuality and confidence, yet all he had done, all evening, was to please her. Not in any sleazy way, but... what was she feeling?

At that moment, she knew.

His tongue played with hers as he alternately stroked her hair and face. She didn't want him to stop, but he pulled away.

"Let's eat," he said.

"You're teasing me.," she said. Then playfully punched his shoulder.

He gave her a smile whose meaning wasn't clear, but his eyes were shining; right in that instant, he was the most beautiful thing in the world.

In the restaurant, Mike chose a table and they ordered the food and a bottle of wine. Hannah chose carefully. She only had a little experience of Indian food, so went for milder dishes.

As they ate the colourful, spiced food, drank wine, and talked, her senses were in overload. There was only one thing certain, she was completely herself in his company. She could say what she wanted, nothing was out of bounds, nothing would cause disagreement or objection. Not that Mike was a pushover; he held to his ideas too. He just seemed to accept her as she was.

Another walk ensued after the meal, and again they passed through the park. As they approached the same bench, she stopped and turned him around to face her. Was she being too pushy? She couldn't help it.

"Mike, kiss me as you did before."

They sat and he held her close. He kissed her hair, then her face, and finally her lips. Simultaneously, they both let out a moan of pleasure.

The night ended with Mike taking her back to her parent's house, a prolonged kiss on the doorstep, another parting which neither wanted and a sleepless night for both.

They met again on Sunday for a walk with Hannah's dog.

"Hey, Wallace. Come and meet Mike."

The black Labrador bounded over made a fuss of Mike. He responded in kind as he stroked and patted Wallace, allowing him a brief lick of his face.

"You like animals?" Hannah asked.

"Oh, yes. I love them."

"I'm glad."

"We had a little dog once, she died when I was young."

"I'm sorry."

"I was too young to understand her loss, but it still hurt."

"Well. It looks like you've got Wallace now." She gave him a beautiful smile.

They spent hours walking and talking in the park and playing with Wallace.

Then came the crunch. They parted knowing it would be five days until they met again; Mike had to return to his barracks for the week.

"I'll call you during the week."

"Please, I'll look forward to that."

He did phone. Every day.

He thought he may be overdoing it, being too keen. But Hannah welcomed his calls, and he felt this was no dating game. He knew what they had found together. He missed her already.

The following weekend they spent most of the time together, starting on Friday night when they met up for few drinks.

Outside the pub, they hugged each other close and kissed like they hadn't seen each other for a year.

"God, I've missed you, Hannah."

The look on her face negated the need for words, but she said it anyway. "I missed you too, Mike."

They laughed and joked in the bar as if they were old friends and left at closing time.

By the end of Saturday, the inevitable happened.

Walking through woodland with Mike and Wallace, Hannah could hold back no longer. She stopped and faced him.

"Mike, I hope I'm not scaring you by moving too fast. I know we hardly know each other."

“I don’t think that’s true,” Mike interjected.

“Well, whatever. Mike, I’m falling in love with you.”

The look in her eyes was that of a scolded puppy waiting for its master to stroke it again.

A single tear fell from one of her eyes. “Have I said too much.”

He wiped the tear away with a finger, then cupped her face in his hands.

“It’s okay, I love you too, Hannah.”

As he kissed her, she sobbed.

“Oh Mike, I’ve been worried all week that you didn’t feel the same. I knew after our date last Saturday.”

“So did I. Crazy, isn’t it?”

Her sobs turned to an attempt at laughter. “I guess it could be. At least that’s how others might see it.”

“They can think what they want. I know what we’ve found.”

And there it was. Almost love at first sight. On Sunday, Hannah introduced Mike to her parents, who immediately took to him despite the warnings they gave following her relationship with Steve. They like him so much they spontaneously asked him to stay for dinner.

Her father ended the evening by shaking his hand. “Take care of her, lad.”

It seemed a strange thing to say, though not considering events a short while down the road of life.

The next weekend they went to see Mike’s parents. After Hannah left and Mike returned home, his mother sat down with him.

“Hon, she is a wonderful girl. What a zest for life!”

“I know. I love her, mum.”

“That’s quick, though I believe love-at-first-sight happens. Take things slowly, Mike, you’re both very young.”

“We can only follow our hearts.”

“You’re a sensible lad, with a wisdom beyond your years. Don’t break her heart.”

“That’s the last thing I would do, mum.”

“I know. I’m so happy for you.”

On the Sunday of the following weekend, two weeks after they met, Mike and Hannah took their relationship to the next level.

Hannah's parents were away until late in the evening and she invited him around for a meal, in return for taking her out. She also had two bottles of wine ready, a white in the fridge for herself, and a red at comfortable room temperature.

She had made a chilli con carne, rice, and garlic bread, which Mike thoroughly enjoyed. Then they settled onto the sofa to watch a film.

They lost the plot of the film within half an hour.

Unable to keep their hands off each other, their passion increased.

Hannah had never been as forward as she had been in the past two weeks. She knew how she felt about Mike, and he about her, and knew what she wanted. She had wanted nothing or anyone so much in her life. There was no doubt in her mind.

Almost out of breath from Mike's tender yet powerful kisses, she said, "Mike, darling, take me to bed."

Mike made a small start, as if I shocked him.

"You think it's too soon?"

"No. I just didn't expect it, and what about your mum and dad?"

"Don't worry about them. They're usually later than they say they will be, and never earlier."

"I want you, really I do."

"I want you to Hannah. But I want our first time to be special, no rush."

She took his hand. "There is no rush. We've got at least four hours, and as fit as you are, I don't think you can last that long."

Mike laughed.

He looked deep into her eyes, making her want him even more.

"Please."

"Okay, lead the way."

Both Mike and Hannah were virgins. Mike took the lead and slowly removed Hannah's clothes.

She was breathless at the thought of giving herself to him and with the anticipation of seeing his body for the first time. He removed her bra and she almost swooned as he pulled her to him and caressed her back.

Then he unzipped her skirt. She was glad she hadn't worn her tight jeans. It fell to the floor, leaving her almost exposed. He had admitted this was his first time, but so far,

he had been masterful. Now he slid her panties down. She gasped as he grabbed her buttocks, and then it was her turn.

She unbuttoned his shirt and peeled it from his shoulders, then she moved her hands over his chest, marvelling at the well-developed pectorals and his flat, firm stomach.

Her breathing increased as she undid his belt, longing to see what lay beneath. She unzipped him, undid the button and eased his jeans to the floor. She was now so aroused, standing naked before him, that she couldn't wait to see his manhood. It strained beneath his boxer shorts and the size almost frightened her. She eased them over his buttocks until they joined the rest of their clothes on the floor.

Despite her excitement, she was nervous too, and her body trembled.

He pulled her to him again and their passion rose ever higher. His erection pulsed against her stomach as they kissed deeply. She reached down and circled her fingers around it, causing Mike to take a sharp intake of breath and then a moan of pleasure.

Then, as only in her dreams until now, he picked her up in his arms and carried her to her bed. He laid her down and moved on top of her. She felt his weight pressing down, even though he was supporting himself with his arms.

He kissed her again, but this time a hand ventured to her breasts and played with them. She was losing control and yet loving it.

As his hand moved lower, it circled her stomach. Then his fingers moved lower still and explored. She arched her back and moaned. This was bliss, though she knew the best was yet to come.

She reached down too. He was hard as a rock.

He whispered in her ear; "Hannah, you are beautiful."

She sighed and her response seemed to increase his confidence; he moved again, this time using his mouth on her breasts. Her fingers grabbed his hair and pulled gently. Then he went lower, kissing her stomach, then lower still.

"Oh my God!" she cried out as his tongue penetrated her. She had the first orgasm that had not come from her own fingers and thrashed around on the bed. But he held her firm.

He moved himself up again as she panted and spoke his name.

She knew what must come next.

"Damn! Hannah, I don't have any condoms."

“It’s okay, baby. I’m on the pill.”

He smiled and kissed her. She sucked at his tongue and then felt him pressing against her. There was pain, not much, though enough to make her bite her lip.

“I’m sorry, am I hurting you?”

“Only a little, don’t worry, it will pass. Just go slowly.”

It wasn’t long before he was fully inside her. She was almost crying in pleasure as he moved in her and came again.

It didn’t surprise her when he didn’t last long. But she had had her pleasure in plenty.

They lay together and he looked deep in her eyes. “I love you, Hannah.”

“I love you too.”

She had heard from friends and read in magazines how a first time, especially with an inexperienced guy, can be disappointing. This was anything but.

“You’ve never done this before?”

“No,” he said.

She smiled. “You must have a natural flair for it.”

Whatever she had felt for him before, what they had just done brought her closer to him than she could ever believe possible.

Mike lay contented, gazing at Hannah. Perspiration covered her face, causing her hair to stick, yet she still looked gorgeous. Damned sexy. He also knew that something special had happened.

“Shall I bring the wine up?”

“That would be nice,” she replied.

They stayed in bed, cuddling, talking, and drinking.

Eventually, Mike became aroused again. This time he lasted longer and brought Hannah to a powerful orgasm before he finished.

He sank back into the covers and wrapped Hannah in his arms. He felt like the luckiest guy in the world.

The only thing spoiling the moment was the thought of tomorrow and their separation for another five days.

They rested for half an hour, then Hannah said: “We’d better get moving, darling. You’ve got to get to work tomorrow.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Do you want a shower? There’s plenty of time until mum and dad get back.”

“That would be a good idea.”

Hannah rose from the bed, threw on a dressing gown and left the room. She returned with a towel for Mike.

“Thanks, sweetie.”

He slipped his boxers on and headed for the bathroom.

Hannah sat back on the bed. They had come so far in the past two weeks and she had changed from a girl to a woman, on account of this night. She had no regrets.

“What the hell,” she said to herself. She followed Mike to the bathroom.

He was already in the shower and didn’t hear her enter. It surprised him when he saw her smiling face peek around the shower curtain.

“Want company?”

“Come on in.”

She stood under the pouring water with Mike and put her head on his chest. His arms enveloped her. She was feeling emotional, from what they had done, and the fact Mike soon had to leave. The water washed down her face and disguised her tears; at least for a while. But Mike sensed the way she felt.

“Hey.” He put a finger under her chin and raised her head.

“We must get used to this, there’s going to be a lot of time apart in the future.”

“I know.”

“But we’re together now, I’ll always be around for you.”

“You mean that?”

“Yes. I don’t believe I could ever feel the way I do with you, with anyone else.”

“It doesn’t worry you that all we’ve known is each other, you know, not having played the field?”

“Not at all.”

“I love you, Mike.”

“I love you too, always.”

They tentatively washed each other, but as their confidence grew, they played.

Nobody would have any doubt. If they could see these two nineteen-year-olds playing and laughing naked in the shower after making love, that there was something very special between them.

Eventually, they helped dry each other and got dressed.

“We’ve still got time to finish the wine,” said Mike.

“Come on then, let’s get comfortable.”

All too soon, the time came for Mike to leave. It was a moment that both wished they could avoid.

“I’d better arrange a taxi.”

“Your welcome to use the phone.”

Mike made a quick call.

“About ten minutes.”

Hannah’s face said more than words ever could.

“I’ll phone tomorrow night.”

“I’ll look forward to that.”

“We’ll think of something to do next weekend, eh?”

“Anything, as long as we’re together.”

They spent the last few minutes in silence, holding each other.

Mike’s heart sank as he heard the taxi pull up outside.

“Here we go.”

He gave Hannah a long kiss.

“Until next weekend.”

“Next weekend,” she said. She struggled to hold back tears.

Mike parted into the night.

Hannah went to her room and cried. The scent of their bodies lingered on her bedding, adding even more to her sadness.

Chapter 3

Mike and Hannah lived for the weekends they spent together. In time, they became used to the separation on weekdays and the times when Mike was away on training manoeuvres. Their love grew ever stronger.

Mike came home on annual leave six months after they first met and relished the thought of the extra time with Hannah. He also had something else planned.

Hannah threw her arms around Mike as he stood on her parent's doorstep

"Oh, Mike. I've missed you."

"I'm back for two weeks now. We'll have a lot of time together, unless you're at college." The words came out in several packets between Hannah's kisses.

"I know, darling. Have you been home yet?"

"Yes, I popped in to see mum and dad, but couldn't wait to see you."

"Come on in."

Mike sat down while Hannah made a pot of tea.

Her mum came down the stairs.

"Hey, Mike. Nice to see you again. How are you doing?"

"Good thanks, Mrs Campbell."

"You two lovebirds will have some extra time together now, eh?"

"Oh yes. We're looking forward to it."

"Hi mum," said Hannah as she walked in with the tea. "You want a cup?"

"No, I'll leave you to it, I'm just going into town. See you later."

"Will you take long?"

"Two hours. Why?"

"Oh, no reason."

Her mum's eyes searched Hannah's and smiled. Did she know?

"At least two hours."

"Okay, see you later, unless we go out."

Her mum left and they heard her car leave.

"You know what I want, Mike?"

"I think so," He smiled. "Let's have a cuppa first."

"I think my mum knows we're sleeping together."

"It doesn't bother you, does it?"

"No. I'm just a bit shy about it."

"You're so cute."

"I want you to stay over if mum and dad are around, so I must face it soon enough."

"I told my mum."

Hannah looked surprised. Or was it shock?

"She asked me first, so I couldn't lie. You know what she said?"

"Go on."

“She knew anyway. She could see how you’d blossomed into a woman so quickly, and there was only one reason for that.”

Hannah blushed. “I’m being silly, aren’t I?”

“No, sensitive maybe, but that’s what I love about you.”

“You’re so sweet.”

Their tea finished, he took her hand and led her towards the stairs.

They made love in Hannah’s bed in the late afternoon sun.

Hannah felt content and complete again, the only time she did fully now, was when she was with Mike. They lay in each other’s arms in the afterglow.

“I will tell mum and dad, soon. I want to wake up in your arms.”

“I do too, darling.”

Hannah felt a slight squeeze from his powerful arms around her, giving her the wonderful sense of security which she loved.

He kissed her and his tongue searched for hers. Despite her satisfaction from their lovemaking, his kisses and hands roaming her body made her tingle between her legs.

“God, Mike. You turn me on so much.”

With the stamina of youth, he was hard again within minutes and they made love for the second time.

As she felt him enter her once again, she moaned into his mouth and vowed to tell her mum as soon as possible. She wanted him; she needed him.

He took her to ecstasy, and she cried out as she came once more. Then he tensed above her and twitched inside her as she delighted in his second orgasm.

Remaining inside her, he lay still and whispered in her ear: “I love you.”

His words, at that special moment, almost made her cry. She held him tight.

After half an hour of cuddling and kissing, they got up and dressed.

“I’m going to take you out for a meal tonight.”

“Oh, that would be lovely.”

“I want it to be special, wear that dark blue dress, the one I love.”

She smiled. “The one you say makes me look so shapely and sexy?”

“Yes, you know the one”

“We’d better get showered then.”

“Together? It saves water.”

She touched his face.

After the shower, Mike waited in the kitchen, drinking tea and playing with Wallace while Hannah got herself ready. Soon her mum reappeared.

“Hi, Mike.”

“Hi, Mrs Campbell.”

“Enough of that, Mike. Call me Claire.”

“Okay, Claire, if you insist.”

“Good lad. Wallace has taken a liking to you, that’s good enough for me, you’re almost part of the family now. What’s Hannah doing?”

“She is getting ready, we’re going out for a meal.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Enjoy yourselves.”

“We will.” Mike was thinking of his other task for the evening and was both excited and anxious.

Hannah came down the stairs and Mike’s jaw dropped. He had seen her in the dress before, but she was stunning. She had tied up her long brown hair, put on some subtle make-up, and was wearing a matching necklace and earrings. The dress, as he knew it would, exemplified her curves and made him aroused again.

“You look wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

He stood up and took her hand, then kissed the back of it. “My princess.”

“Wow,” said Claire as she walked in from the kitchen. “Who’s going to be the most gorgeous girl in town tonight?”

“Thanks, mum.”

“You’re a lucky guy, Mike.”

“I know.” He did too. His heart swelled with admiration for Hannah, and pride that he was taking her out. “I thought Chinese for tonight.”

“That’s good with me.”

They called a taxi and made their way into Glasgow centre, first finding a bar for a quiet drink. Hannah was dressed to kill, but he was only in smart casual wear.

“I feel under-dressed compared to you,” he said.

“You look fine, don’t worry.”

After finishing their drinks, they took a short walk to the Chinese restaurant. Mike selected a table and they ordered food.

The meal was enjoyable, but Mike was anxious and feeling a little on edge.

Hannah picked up on it. “Are you okay, honey, you’ve gone quiet?”

“I’m fine. A few things on my mind, that’s all, and absorbed in how beautiful you look.”

“You say such lovely things.” She reached across the table and took his hand.

“Do you want another drink here?” he asked.

“Mm, I don’t mind.”

“Let’s see if they do cocktails.”

They both settled for Mojitos. After the first sip, Mike steeled himself for the next part of the evening. He took a deep breath, then rummaged in his pocket and found what he was looking for.

Hannah still thought there was something up with Mike. Now he was fidgeting and seemed to search for something. He withdrew a small box, which drew her attention. Could it be? Her heart fluttered.

Mike stood up and moved to the side of the table. He appeared nervous. What is he up to?

He bent down close to her. Oh, my God! Is he doing what I think he is?

She felt dizzy.

Her heart raced.

“Hannah?”

She tilted her head sideways, stressing her impish look; his heart surged with love and his confidence suddenly grew. She was the most beautiful woman in the world. He wanted her; he had to do it.

He moved beside her, bent down on one knee, and took her hand.

He looked straight into her eyes. “Hannah, will you marry me?” He opened the small box which contained a sapphire ring and offered it to her.

“Oh, Mike.” Tears rolled down her face. “I will. Of course, I will.”

Mike leaned forward and kissed her hand. “You’ve thrilled me.”

“Me too,” she said. “I love you, my darling.”

“So, can I get up now?”

She giggled through her tears, which made him giddy. “Yes, my love.”

He bent down and kissed her, a long, lingering, deep kiss.

As he raised himself again, he noticed a few people in the restaurant looking at them. Then they clapped. He performed a perfunctory bow and sat back down.

“I didn’t expect that!” He said.

Hannah blushed at the attention and wiped away her tears. “Look what you’ve done to me, Mike. I’m an emotional mess!”

He smiled and held her hand. “I’m glad you said yes.”

“You honestly didn’t expect any other answer, did you?”

“Well, no. But it was a big step.”

“I want this, darling. It has crossed my mind, but I thought there’s no rush.”

“There isn’t. But I wanted to make it clear to you, and everyone else, what my long-term intentions are. I only want you, and that will never change.”

“Oh, darling. I love you.”

“You know, before we left, your mum asked me to call her by her first name, said I’m almost part of the family.”

“Well, you are now. And that makes it easier telling them about, you know, us spending the night together. There’s no reason not to now, I’ve no excuses.”

He smiled. “No, you haven’t. So, when do we tell everybody?”

“What, about sleeping together?” There was a playful look in her eye.

“No, I mean about being engaged.”

“I knew what you meant, silly. There’s time tonight to tell them all.”

“I agree.”

“Your dad knows already, but not that it was going to be tonight. I asked him for permission last weekend.”

“Aw. I’m impressed you wanted to do it the traditional way. It wasn’t necessary, but it’s very sweet.”

“You think he would have told your mum?”

“Oh no. He’s quite a romantic at heart. He would want her to hear it from us when we had done it.”

“That’s good. Shall we go?”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to mum’s reaction.”

“You sure she’ll be pleased?”

She punched his arm. “You’re being silly again.”

They first went to Hannah's home. Fortunately, her father, Stuart, had returned. They entered with beaming smiles. Stuart thought little of it, he had already guessed, but it perplexed Claire.

"What are you two looking so happy about?"

"Mum, we've just got engaged."

Claire was speechless for a moment, causing Hannah to feel a sense of panic. But then she rushed forward to her daughter, kissed and hugged her.

"Oh, Hannah. That's so wonderful."

She turned to Mike. Her face was radiant.

"Mike, you are so good for her, I'm happy." She held him tight.

Stuart waited for Claire to calm down, then stood up, walked to Mike. and shook his hand.

"Congratulations, Mike. I know you'll do us proud." Then he hugged him.

Next, Stuart approached Hannah. He held her at arm's length and admired her.

"You look amazing tonight, darling."

"Thanks, dad."

"He's a fine young man." He drew her close and put his arms around her as he kissed her cheeks. "I think this calls for a drink."

"Just one," said Hannah. "We're off to tell Mike's parents soon."

"What will you have, Mike . . . son?"

"A whiskey, if you have one."

"What Scotsman doesn't? I have a nice single malt for you."

"Wine for me," said Hannah.

"That'll do for me too," said Claire.

Stuart held his drink out. "A toast to the two of you. May you have long and happy lives together. Cheers."

"Thanks, Stuart," said Mike.

They took a refill, then Hannah insisted they move on.

"We understand," said Claire.

"Can I have a quick word, mum? In private."

"Sure, come into the kitchen."

Once they were alone, Hannah hesitantly opened up.

"Mum, I wanted to tell you Mike and I are sleeping together. We have been since shortly after we met."

“I thought as much. It’s okay, honey.”

“Well, it’s just we have little enough time together, I want him to stay over.”

Claire reached out and held her. “I’ve no problem with that, and your dad won’t either.”

“You sure?”

“Of course. We want you to be happy. He’s a smashing guy too. I quite envy you.”

“Mum!”

They both laughed.

“Anything else?”

“No. But we’ll stay at Mike’s too, so sometimes I won’t be home.”

“Oh, dear. Well, it had to come eventually. But you’re grown up now, you can do as you want.”

“I love you, mum.”

“I love you too. Now run along and give Mike’s parent the same pleasure you’ve given us.”

After Mike and Hannah left, Stuart sat down with Claire.

“They’re a bit young, don’t you think?” He said.

Claire shook her head. “It’s not as if they’re getting married right away. If it all falls apart, other than someone getting hurt, nothing is lost. But that won’t happen. Have you seen how they are together? They have an unbreakable bond, a love that will last.”

“I know you’re right. Just being protective over my little girl, I guess.”

“She’s not a little girl, Stu. Not anymore.”

“I know.”

“Do you? They’ve been sleeping together since they first met. I thought they had, but Hannah told me just now.”

“Oh.”

“And Mike will stay over here with Hannah sometimes.”

“Oh.” Stuart raised his eyebrows.

“I trust you’re okay with that, love?”

He smiled. “I’ll get used to it. Anyway, he appreciates a good single malt, we’ll get on fine.”

After a brief taxi journey, Mike and Hannah arrived at his parents’ house. Again, they were fortunate, Adrian and Maggie were both at home.

“By the way, I told my mum about us staying together.”

“Well done. Was she cool with it?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s great.”

Mike took Hannah’s hand. “Well, here we go again.”

She smiled and squeezed his hand. “I’m so excited.”

“Ah,” said Adrian, “I wondered where you had got to. Hi Hannah.

Lovely to see you.”

“We’ve been out for a special meal,” said Mike.

“Special?”

“Yep. Is mum about?”

“Here I am.” Maggie walked through from the kitchen. “Hannah, my dear.” She gave her a warm hug.

“We’ve got some news,” said Mike.

“Oh?” said Maggie.

“Hannah and I got engaged tonight.”

“Mike, that’s wonderful!” She was still holding Hannah. “I’ve gained a daughter.” She kissed her forehead. “I’m so pleased.”

Adrian stood and gave Mike a fatherly hug, then went to Hannah.

With Maggie’s arms still around her, he added his own.

They sandwiched Hannah between them.

She felt such love flowing towards her; it brought tears to her eyes again.

“So, when is the auspicious day,” said Adrian, after he released Hannah.

“We haven’t decided yet,” said Mike. “One step at a time. Probably next year.”

“Great,” said Adrian. “A drink!”

“We had the same reaction at my parents,” said Hannah. “I’m a bit tipsy.”

“No excuses,” said Adrian. “You usual, wine?”

“Go on then.”

“Mike?”

“Better stay on the whiskey.”

“Whiskey it is then, and gin and tonic for your mum.”

“Well,” said Maggie. “This is splendid. So, you’ve told your parents, Hannah?”

“Yes, we’ve just come from there. Mike took me out for a lovely meal where he proposed to me. It’s been magical.”

“Aw, that’s nice. Hannah, we’re so pleased, and we’ve longed to have you as part of the family.”

Hannah smiled and looked lovingly at Mike. “I don’t care what anyone wants as long as I have Mike.”

“I can see that.”

“You’re a lucky man,” said Adrian.

“As everyone keeps telling me, dad. I know.”

The drinks flowed. There was nowhere for Mike and Hannah to rush off to now, so they relaxed into it.

By the time they wound up, it was late, nearly midnight.

“You’re not planning ongoing home, are you, Hannah? It’s a little late.” Said Maggie.

“Well…” Hannah hesitated.

“You can stay here, you’re very welcome.”

“I suppose it would be sensible.”

“I trust you don’t want separate rooms?” She took Hannah’s hand as if to reassure her.

Hannah looked at Mike.

“My room will be okay, mum,” he said.

“I know it’s not the first time,” Maggie whispered to Hannah. “Don’t worry about a thing, we love having you here.”

Hannah’s cheeks were burning, but she knew the alcohol would mask her blushes. But it relaxed her. All she could feel, other than the buzz of the wine, was the love pouring out to her from Mike, Maggie, and Adrian.

Mike and Hannah went up to his bedroom.

“I’m sorry, it’s masculine compared to yours.”

Hannah looked around the room.; pale greys and muted reds, and the bedding matched with red and black stripes. Posters of cars and motorbikes hung on the walls.

She turned to face him and held his hands in hers.

“It’s fine, I would expect anything else. It’s cosy. But I’m here with you, which is all that matters. This is my dream, to go to bed with you and not have to leave. I’ve wanted this for so long.”

“Me too, darling. You happy with my parents being next door?”

“It makes me nervous, the thought of them hearing us.”

He kissed her mouth. “We can be quiet. But to be honest, I’m done tonight. It’s been a long day. I just want to cuddle up.”

“That’s okay. Take me to bed, handsome. But will you undress me?”

He smiled. “As long as you expect nothing else tonight.”

“I can’t promise I won’t get turned on. This is a special night for us.”

“I know, baby.”

Mike’s hands moved around to her back and unzipped the dress as she nuzzled his neck. She ran her hands over his muscular shoulders. His strength alone turned her on. The zip stopped halfway down, exposing her back where his fingers circled her bare skin.

His hands then moved up to her hair and loosened the fastenings; it fell around her shoulders and tickled her skin, already sensitized by Mike’s caresses. With the contentment of the day and the alcohol in her body, she relaxed and melted into him. She belonged here.

She felt his fingers moving through her hair. She always loved it as a kid when her mother massaged her head, but this was bliss and she moaned in delight. All too soon, he stopped. His hands returned to the zip and drew it down to the base of her spine. He peeled it off her shoulders and it floated to the floor, leaving her exposed before him, a sensation she relished. She gasped as the bulge in his trousers brushed against her bare stomach.

“I thought you were past it,” she giggled and then reached down. He was hard.

“Oh, Mike. Can you? It doesn’t have to last long, I know you’re tired. I want to fall asleep with that feeling of being yours.”

“We’ll see.”

She returned the favour and removed his shirt and trousers until they both stood in only their underwear. He unclipped her bra and rolled her panties down as she removed his underpants.

He lifted her in his arms and placed her on his bed.

“I’ll be gentle.”

“Oh, Mike.”

They made love, tenderly but briefly. Curled up in each other’s arms, they fell deeply asleep with no concerns over departing before a parent arrived.

Mike stirred first in the morning. The cool, grey morning light played on her face, but she appeared warm and radiant. He watched her as she slept, something he would delight in for many years to come.

Her eyelids flickered. She was dreaming, and Mike knew just how much he loved this woman. A faint smile played on her mouth and her breasts gently rose and fell. He didn't want to disturb her sleep but couldn't resist touching her.

He brushed some loose hairs from her face and her breathing changed. Slowly she came around and her eyes opened.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he said.

Hannah yawned and stretched a little, then the smile broke right across her face.

"Good morning, baby." She reached out a hand to his face and stroked it. "Darling, can we do this every day now?"

"Whenever we can. Fancy a coffee?"

"I fancy something else first."

There was a sparkle in her eyes which was irresistible.

They spent the rest of his leave similarly, spending their nights either at her house or his. The weekdays dragged for Mike as he waited for Hannah to finish college, though he eventually occupied himself.

They had more quality time together than ever before and learned a lot about each other, all of it good.

When it was time for him to return to duty, the tears flowed. But Mike had just passed his driving test and was looking out of a cheap car. Glencorse Barracks was less than sixty miles from Glasgow, so having transport would provide greater flexibility for them to see each other.

Their first hurdle lay ahead, a two-month training exercise in Norway and Germany. It was to give them a taste of the future, one which they would tackle together and survive.

Chapter 4

Mike found a car, a rather old but serviceable Ford Escort. It had belonged to a colleague who was upgrading, and he knew its history; it was reliable. It would end his ties to train timetables and save considerable time waiting at train stations. He could get home earlier and stay later, hence spending more time with Hannah. It may only amount to two hours on a weekend off, but it was valuable to them.

He gave it a good clean and polish on Thursday evening at the barracks and on Friday made his way home.

“What do you think?” he said to Hannah after arriving at her house.

“Not bad at all.”

“It’s nothing special, but I know the car, it will do for now. How about a trip up to the hills tomorrow?”

“That would be nice.”

After saying hello to Hannah’s parents, he drove her to his. They stayed for a drink and then returned to Hannah’s home where they spent the night.

On Saturday morning they ate breakfast and then set off.

“We’ll head up to Loch Lomond, take a walk, and have a pub lunch. How’s that?” said Mike.

“Lovely, darling.”

Mike loved the Highlands, it had been a while since he’d last ventured far. Now with a car, he had gained the freedom to travel where he wanted.

It was a cool but sunny day; trees, turning to the reds, browns and oranges of autumn, dotted the green landscape.

They reached the southern part of the Loch and followed the road which clung to its western shore, eventually arriving at the picturesque hamlet of Aldochlay. Here they stopped and got out for a walk.

“It’s chilly,” said Hannah.

“Not as cold as Norway, I bet.”

“Oh, don’t remind me.” She slid her arm inside his. “It is beautiful here though.”

“It is.”

They strolled along the shore past the moorings of small boats. There were several small islands close offshore, all heavily wooded.

“It’s peaceful,” she said.

“Aye. Much better than town life.” He turned and kissed her.

“I can’t believe you’ll be gone in two weeks.”

“I know. Let’s not dwell on it, we have this weekend and the next. I’ll be home before Christmas.”

“That seems a lifetime away.”

“It will pass quick enough.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“You know it’s going to be par for the course, deployments away. Many much longer than this one.”

“I know.”

“I love this job, Hannah. It’s all I ever wanted for years.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to give it up, I know how much it means to you. I accept that.”

They continued to walk, hand in hand, and then sat on a bench by the shore.

“I love every moment with you, Mike. Even just sitting like this, without talking.”

“Me too, darling.”

Minutes passed, then Mike said: “I’m getting hungry. Let’s move on to Tarbert and find a friendly pub that does food.”

“I’m hungry too. Come on, then.”

Tarbert was less than ten miles away, and they soon covered the distance.

“Let’s see what we can find,” said Mike.

They found an establishment, The Village Inn, set in pleasant grounds which served food and traditional ales.

“This should do.”

“Looks nice,” said Hannah.

Mike parked the car and they walked into the bar. He approached the counter and asked about food.

“Here’s the menu, sir. If you’d like to pick a table, a waitress will be over to take your order soon.”

“Thanks, we’ll have a drink in the meantime. Hannah?”

“A white wine, please.”

“And I’ll have a pint of heavy.”

“Yes, sir.”

The barman poured the drinks and they moved to a table.

“You okay having a drink, with driving?” said Hannah.

“I’ll only have the one, take it slow. With some food, it will be fine.”

She touched his hand across the table. “This is cosy.”

“I was thinking this week. I know you still have two years at college, but it would be nice if we got our own place, just rent somewhere to start with.”

“Oh, Mike. That’s a wonderful idea.”

“I thought perhaps you could move to Edinburgh, find a job there, maybe in a flower shop, get some experience?”

“I could see doing that. It’s a long way ahead yet though.”

Mike smiled. “I like to plan.”

“It’s a lovely thought.”

“We’ll buy somewhere eventually, when I get promoted. I want to stay based in Glasgow so I’d rather it be there.”

“You do plan for the future, don’t you?” She stroked his hand. “It’s touching. I now we’re engaged, but you see an entire future with me?”

“I do.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The waitress appeared. “Would sir and madam care to order?”

“Hannah?”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

Refreshed after the meal, they went for another gentle walk before finding a bench to sit on for a while. Mike was admiring the boats again, laying at their moorings, more plentiful here than at Aldochlay.

“I’d like to have a boat one day.”

“Oh, what sort of boat?”

“A yacht. Not for lake sailing like this, but deep water, sailing the Western Isles.”

“Have you done any sailing?”

“A bit with my dad and I took the opportunity with the Army a few months ago. It’s a long-term goal, I want something like a thirty-five-foot yacht ultimately.”

“That’ll be expensive, I guess?”

“You’re right there, that’s why it won’t be for some years. But I can always work up to it, get something smaller, just to sail around local waters on the Clyde.”

“It’s good to have dreams.”

“Shall we head back?” Said, Mike.

“Yes. Perhaps we can find somewhere else to walk when the food has gone down. Somewhere hilly.”

“Plenty of that around here. So, you like hill walking?”

“That’s one of my pleasures,” said Hannah. “I did a lot of it when I was at school, not so much over the past two years.”

“Come on then, let’s find you a hill to walk.”

They enjoyed the rest of the afternoon, walking and talking, and then returned home with the rest of the weekend before Mike returned to his barracks late on Sunday night.

Two weeks later, Mike and Hannah had a tearful farewell as Mike departed for exercises in Germany and Norway. Hannah had cooked a meal for Mike and her parents and made a fine job of it.

“She’ll make a good wife,” said Stuart, smiling.

“It wouldn’t bother me if she couldn’t cook at all,” said Mike. “I’d love her no matter what.”

“A pity you can’t have a drink with driving later.”

“Ah well. We had enough last night,” said Mike.

“You can say that again,” said Hannah. “It took me until this afternoon to recover.”

On Saturday, Mike and Hannah’s family had laid on a sending-off party for Mike. They planned it without his knowledge, and he appreciated the effort they all made. Claire had cooked a meal and when they finished, they played games. The fun and laughter promoted a high consumption of alcohol and by one o’clock in the morning, they were all crashed out on chairs, trying to watch a film on television, but falling asleep.

Finally, it was time for Mike to leave. Maggie and Adrian also popped around to say goodbye to their son.

Maggie turned to Hannah. “You’re always welcome to come and see us when Mike’s away. We want you to, it’s always lovely to see you.”

“Aw, thanks, Maggie,” said Hannah.

After everyone had finished with Mike, they let him, and Hannah, have their last moments together alone.

As they kissed, tears streamed down Hannah’s face.

“Hey,” said Mike. “It’s going to be hard, I know. I’ll keep in touch when I can.”

Between sobs, Hannah said: “I don’t know how I’ll cope without you. All these weekends we’ve spent together, what am I going to do when you’re not here?”

“What did you do before we met?”

She attempted to laugh. “You know, I don’t remember. There is you, and there was a time before you, which seems to have disappeared; another life, a long time ago.”

“That’s a sweet thought, baby.”

“I know you have to go, darling. We have to face it.”

Mike picked up his bags and moved towards the door. Hannah followed.

He loaded his luggage in the car and then wrapped Hannah in his arms again. He was trying to put off the moment too. They had another long kiss and then Mike forced the move. “

“I have to go, sweetie.”

“I know you do.” Tears streaked her face.

After one last kiss, he turned, sat down in his car, and started the engine.

He blew another kiss as Hannah gave a weak wave and he backed out of the driveway.

With another wave, he was gone.

Hannah sensed an empty pit in her stomach and stayed where she was in the chilly night air, staring into the distance.

Claire came out to see her. “Baby, are you okay?”

Hannah turned to her mum and flew into her arms, sobbing.

“No, I’m not, mum.”

“Come on in, it’s so cold out here.”

As they went in, Maggie and Adrian were leaving.

They all said goodbye.

“Remember what I said about coming around to see us,” said Maggie.

“I will,” said Hannah.

Hannah and her mum continued onto the lounge. Stuart had already switched the television on.

“Stu, they’ve only just left, couldn’t you wait? Hannah’s upset.”

“Sorry.” He turned off the television.

“How are you, baby,” he said to Hannah.

Hannah sniffed. “I’m missing Mike so much already.”

“I know you are,” said Stuart.

“You love that guy, don’t you?” said Claire.

“He’s my world, my life.”

Mike had kept a brave as he left, but his emotions were running high. As he drove down the street, a tear fell from each eye.

Chapter 5

On Tuesday, Mike's unit commenced the journey to Germany. The first leg was a coach to RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. Once in the holding area, they had a two-hour wait until their flight. Mike wished he could phone Hannah, but she would be in class at college.

"Get used to this place, lads," said Sergeant McKay, "you'll be seeing a lot of it if you stay in this mob."

"Your first trip away, eh, Mike?" said Corporal Graves.

"Aye, it is."

"Should be a good one, short and sweet. Norway will be mostly all work and no play, but we'll have some fun in Rheindahlen if we can get into town."

They were heading for exercises with elements of the British Army on the Rhine. The first week would be local tactical training, then two weeks out in dense woodland, learning how to fight in forests. They would continue this in Norway.

The weeks flew by and Mike enjoyed the hard work, despite missing Hannah. This was his first taste of true soldiering, other than being against friendly forces, it was all he dreamed it would be. The men came together, working as a team more than usual. Mike wondered how much deeper that would go in actual conflict. He would find out soon enough.

On his last night in the forest, he lay in his sleeping bag in a tent and thought of Hannah. Being on manoeuvres, he hadn't had the chance to call her for nearly two weeks. That she remained foremost in his mind encouraged him, after passing thoughts that he may have got himself in too deep, too fast. He now knew this job was all he expected, and he loved it. It bothered him they would sometimes spend months apart, not just weeks like this. But now he was sure of his feelings, both for Hannah and the Army.

The wake-up call came extra early in the morning. It was the last day and they had a long march back to the transport which would return them to the base. Mike made a perfunctory attempt at morning ablutions and then sat down for breakfast in the makeshift dining arrangements. The food

coming from the field kitchen surprised him. It would not win any stars, but under the circumstances, it was more than acceptable. It was only a little better than the greasy-spoon cafes of Glasgow. But sitting in woodland at six o'clock in the morning, it was tasty and satisfying. He was one of the few who thought so.

“We’re expected to march twenty miles on this shit!” said Private Holmes.

“It’s okay,” said Mike.

Pete raised his eyebrows: “Okay? Bloody hell mate, you must have eaten in some rough dives.”

“Just get it down your neck, Holmes,” said Sergeant McKay. “You’ll need the energy.”

Pete picked up a sausage, dripping with fat, shrugged his shoulders, and said: “Okay.” He put the whole thing in his mouth and chewed.

Mike chuckled. He was sure Pete was playing on it more than he disliked the food.

After breakfast, they packed their kit and moved out. Some flagged at the halfway point, but Mike had never felt fitter and marched on with vigour.

At Rheindahlen they had a day to rest and clean up before the long overland journey to Norway. Mike joined a group of lads heading into town for a drink.

He had a beer and then excused himself for ten minutes to phone Hannah and to let his mum know he was well.

He waited anxiously as the dialling tone purred. Then he heard a sweet voice.

“Hi Hannah, it’s Mike.”

“Hi, sweetheart,” Hannah replied. “I’m missing you like crazy.”

“Me too, baby.”

“How’s it all going out there?”

“Finished in Germany, heading for Norway tomorrow. I’ve enjoyed it, but hard work. I miss a soft bed with your warm body in it.”

“Aw, same here. I felt so lonely the first few nights. So, tell me more about what you’ve been up to.”

“War games in the forests mainly, but the closest to being a soldier since I joined up. Put a lot of my training into action and learnt a lot more

on top. We did a night exercise three days ago. That was something. We had to take an enemy-occupied hill and pulled it off.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Kind of. But three of our lot got killed; pretend, you know. It exhausted us. We finished at five in the morning.”

“Gosh, that was a long night.”

“It was. I slept until the following afternoon.”

The conversation continued for another five minutes, becoming more intimate, less about work. Mike brought the call to an end. He still had to phone his parents.

“I’ll phone again when I can, darling.”

“Okay, take care,” said Hannah.

They blew several kisses down the phone before the last goodbye.

The forces heading to Norway were vast. Thousands of troops from all NATO countries were on the move to attend the massive exercise. They designed it to test NATO’s readiness and ability to deploy its resources to protect any member states from aggression. The logistics were a massive undertaking.

Several convoys departed from Rheindahlen and its environs. Mike’s unit was in a convoy of thirty-two vehicles. There were armoured personnel carriers, troop carriers, self-propelled howitzers and rocket launchers, a bridge-building vehicle, and low-loaders carrying other artillery and Chieftain tanks. Mike was in awe as the vehicles commenced the journey, many starting by billowing black smoke from their exhausts as engines rumbled to life. He felt part of something big.

Mike was stationed in a troop carrier with twenty other soldiers. The weather was fine, so they had the coverings rolled up and a magnificent view. His feelings settled into boredom as the day dragged on, though there was ever-changing scenery as they passed through countryside, small towns, and villages. Bystanders stood and watched, many waved and some cheered.

As they travelled, many more troops were landing at Rotterdam, while Germany sent many of its heavy artillery and tanks by sea. Warships and their support craft were on route, and squadrons of aircraft were making ready to join in. But all were to descend ultimately on Norway. Some,

including Mike's unit, were to carry out land and sea exercises in the west, designed to simulate invasion by sea. Others grouped in the eastern part of the country as a defence against a land-borne invasion.

"Hey, Mike. This is already getting to be a drag." Private Hugh Barry said.

"Yeah, and a long way to go yet."

"Don't reckon we'll get a beer until this is all over."

"Not likely, all our stopovers will be short."

"I'm going to get a kip if I can."

"Don't blame you," said Mike. He laughed. "If you can sleep through all this shaking"

"I'll try."

Mike was weary too; there was nothing to do, so he tried to nap. He dropped off for a while and dreamed of Hannah. They were lying in bed in each other's arms. He awoke with a slight depression at the thought of not being able to see her for so long.

Corporal Graves pulled out a pack of cards to help relieve the monotony. "Anyone for a game of hearts?"

Mike and two others took him up on the offer.

They made the games last for two hours until even that led to boredom.

"Ah well," said the Corporal. "Not long until the islands of Funen and Zeeland, that'll provide a change of scenery to liven things up."

They came to the border between Germany and Denmark. This was another of the tests for the exercise, the ability of such a mass of men and equipment to cross borders between many countries. After a brief delay, they passed through with little hindrance.

After ninety minutes they came to a large suspension bridge which took them to the island of Funen, an attractive mix of old and modern architecture, lakes, rivers and canals. But they had little chance to savour the beauty of the land. After crossing the island, they arrived at the ferry to Zeeland. The Command had chartered extra ships to accommodate the convoy. The quayside swarmed with vehicles and military traffic controllers.

One by one, the vehicles embarked until the hold was full. The first ship departed, and another arrived. Mike's troop carrier was on the second; they had given priority on the first ship to the slower vehicles such as the

tank transporters. He was keen to get on board as once they landed on Zeeland island there were only forty miles to their stopover at Rosenberg Barracks in Copenhagen.

Finally, the convoy reached its first destination, the sounds of dozens of diesel engines died, and peace descended. Mike laid out on the grass and stretched. There had been little opportunity for any exercise for most of the day.

The cooks made a full meal ready for the troops, a welcome change from the privations of ration packs they had survived on since breakfast.

Mike took a walk with some colleagues before the evening meal, but they were limited to going around in circles with strict instructions to stay within the boundary of the camp. He searched the surroundings for any sign of a telephone box but found none. They were now in a different currency zone. But tomorrow they would be in Sweden. There was no point, and no opportunity, to make a currency exchange.

The following day they undertook an equally long journey, this time ending at Rygge Air Station about thirty miles south of Oslo.

Unlike Rosenberg Barracks, Rygge was a hive of activity. They were the only foreign troops staying over, but aircraft were coming in from several countries, using Rygge as a refuelling and last staging post before their destinations somewhere else in Norway.

“Gents,” said Sergeant McKay. “You’ll be pleased to know we are staying here for the next thirty-six hours. Tomorrow, you can exchange some of your hard-earned sterling into Norwegian Kroner. Lieutenant Gibson will give you the details tomorrow. You’ll not have much chance for spending once we leave here, but there are several payphones for those that want to call home.”

Peter Holmes opened his mouth to speak, but two incoming F-15 aircraft drowned out his voice. Eventually, he could talk.

“How come we’re staying, Sarge?”

“There’s a backlog of traffic on a narrow pass up in the hills because of heavy snowfall. We’ve been told to let them get clear. Make the most of it, lads.”

Mike relished the chance to call Hannah. It made for a restless night, having to wait until tomorrow.

The Air Station didn’t become quiet until late into the evening. Aircraft leaving for their forward operating bases were almost immediately

replaced by new ones coming in for the night.

After a sumptuous but basic evening meal in the base canteen, Mike passed some time testing his aircraft recognition. Two American F-15's took off. He wondered if they were the same that came in earlier in the evening. Soon after, an entire squadron of British Tornado's landed in quick succession. Four French Dassault Mirage followed, then three Super Etendard. Just before he became bored, he heard a thunderous noise of something approaching from the east. Soon, a huge behemoth loomed out of the sky on approach to the runway. His suspicions were soon confirmed as he identified a Lockheed C-5 Galaxy heavy-lift aircraft. It was the first he had seen close-up and was an impressive sight. Not much could top that, so he made for his bed.

They billeted his team in a small hangar and the camp beds provided were comfortable; most probably because he had been sitting for most of the day and was also tired. Any bed would have done. He was asleep in moments.

The next morning, after breakfast, Captain McCoy appeared.

"Gents, the purser's office will be open for money exchanges from ten o'clock until one. Tomorrow is early breakfast. We move out at oh-six hundred, with another long haul ahead of us. The day will take us to our base position for the duration of the exercises. Have a good day."

Sergeant McKay took the Captain's place. "This afternoon is rest time guys. Spend the morning on equipment maintenance, then the day is yours. It's likely to be the last chance for several days to call home, so take the opportunity now."

Mike went straight to the purser's office at ten, though there was no rush as Hannah would be at college. He exchanged a few pounds and then returned to work. In the afternoon he took a walk to scout for telephone points. He found six. With a lot of guys wanting to make calls, there could be some waiting ahead.

Fortunately, many made their calls in the afternoon. In the evening, he only had to wait ten minutes to get a phone.

He waited as the dialling tone connected him to Hannah's house.

Her mother answered. "Oh, hi, Mike. Yes, she's in, I'll just get her. How are you?"

"Fine, long days on the road but nearly there."

"Good. I'll get Hannah."

The next voice made him feel weak at the knees.

“Mike, darling. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“And yours, sweetheart.”

“Where are you now?”

“We’re at an airbase in Oslo. It’s getting colder already.”

“Same here, too, but guess it’s colder where you are.”

“Just a bit. There’s loads of activity here, aircraft and ground forces. Planes are coming and going all the time.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“Hardly, we’ve been on the road for two days. Hopefully, things will get more interesting once the war games start.”

The call lasted another five minutes.

“I’d better go, darling. Others are waiting for the phone, and I want to keep a few Kroner in case I get the chance to call you again.”

“Okay, baby. Phone if you can, but if you don’t, I’ll understand.”

Mike seemed to float away from the telephone in a daze; he barely acknowledged Sam Smith as he left the phone to him. Speaking with Hannah always had this effect on him. He felt transported to another place, a place where he and Hannah were alone together.

He took a stroll to give himself time to think about her before being surrounded by the mundane banter of his colleagues. He missed her madly and knew this would be something that would plague him throughout his career. All he could see at that moment was her face, and sometimes her body. He yearned for her.

Eventually, he composed himself and returned to the hangar. This was his other world. Men were talking or playing cards, making full use of the downtime before they went into the fray. Although only an exercise, there was still the feeling of going into combat.

After a good sleep, the men were woken at five o’clock for a quick breakfast before shipping out. Mike still recalled the conversation with Hannah. he barely had time to wash, get dressed, and eat, before they were once seating themselves in one of the many troop carriers. They had instructions to dress adequately for the conditions. Mike needed no prompting. It was still below zero after breakfast.

The convoy rumbled to life. With local military personnel providing traffic control, they moved out of the base and were soon heading north. After a few hours, their course changed more westerly and the roads

narrowed. The landscape became more barren and communities dwindled until they passed only occasional solitary houses, these became increasingly rare.

The temperature dropped further as their elevation increased.

“It’s fucking freezing!” said Sam Smith, as he huddled into his overcoat.

“Stop your whining, Smith,” said Corporal Graves. “It’s gonna get colder yet, that will sort the men from the boys.”

Mike chuckled to himself. Sam was one of the few in the unit who wasn’t Scottish. He hailed from somewhere in the midlands and would have been more prepared if he was used to Scottish winters. Bloody Sassenachs!

Three hours and a hundred miles of slow, narrow roads later, they arrived at what would become their base camp for the next two weeks. It was in a valley a few miles north of the village of Fortun at the head of Lustrafjorden.

There was nothing there but an open expanse of land and a stream. Within thirty-six hours they transformed it into a makeshift military base, temporarily home to over three-hundred soldiers and a host of hardware.

Before they finished all works, the command centre was operational. The Officers and SNCO’s received a tactical briefing, based on current information.

Mike had to wait for the Sergeants to be passed this down. A few hours later, they formed the first patrols. An escalation in the simulated hostilities followed, and they sent Mike as a member of one of two platoons which were to reconnoitre an area ten miles north of the base where the suspected an enemy incursion.

To Mike, this exercise had a more realistic feel to it than that in Germany. They were inland with little cover and an unknown enemy in an undefined location; the scenarios were complex, both men and hardware were present in far greater numbers, attacks could come from anywhere.

Captain McCoy, Lieutenant Gibson, and Sergeant McKay were old hands. All had experience in Northern Ireland, and the Captain was a veteran of both the Korean and Suez wars. Mike had full confidence in them. In years to come, he too would become a trusted man of hardened battle experience.

As they climbed a nearby hill, Mike could see warships in the fjord. Days later, he also saw the conning tower of a submarine. Landing craft

ferried troops and weapons ashore in the far distance. They were red forces, the enemy. The two platoons were to halt or frustrate this invasion party. Despite a tactical brief from the Sergeant, he had no idea how they would achieved this; his knowledge of battlefield tactics was in its infancy.

They set up camp on high ground behind a peak which hid them from the landing troops. Through the night they kept watches, both for intelligence gathering purposes and to protect their position.

“Four teams, two-hour watches, men.” Said Lieutenant Gibson.
“Sergeant, I’ll leave it two you to arrange the manpower.”

“Yes, sir.”

He delegated Mike the second watch, so had two hours to grab a brief nap. He failed to get to sleep but was sure he would be ready at two in the morning when his shift was to finish.

He was just dropping off when Corporal Graves called for the next watch.

Mike extricated himself from his sleeping bag. He had remained fully dressed, but the air temperature was now below freezing. He donned thermal gloves, hat and coat; they did little to ease the chill.

He settled in behind the peak with Privates Hugh and Holmes.

“Night goggles on fellas,” said Sergeant McKay. “Call me if you see anything out of the usual, anything at all. I’ll see you in two hours.”

As far as Mike knew, the Sergeant had yet to sleep. Was he staying up all night? His stamina had amazed him in the past, speeding well ahead of far younger men on cross-country runs in full battle kit.

He observed the scene below, with a naked eye he could just make out dim red lights about two miles away. With night vision goggles on, the full picture came into view; several dozen men were busy on the shore, and more landing craft brought reinforcements, but the enemy advanced no further through his watch.

He was tiring as the next team relived his. He staggered to his tent and struggled into his sleeping bag without removing a single item of clothing. The cold had chilled him and to the bone and it took half an hour until he warmed up enough to surrender to sleep.

The platoons were put on full alert three hours later.. The red forces were on the move, heading almost towards them.

Sergeant McKay was speaking on the radio to the Lieutenant at the main camp. Next, the Captain came through.

“How many troops, Sergeant.”

“Thirty to forty, I would say, and they’re setting up long-range artillery.”

“I’m going to call in air support.”

“Roger, sir.”

Half an hour later, as Mike was still coming around after an aborted sleep, all hell broke loose.

The distant noise of jet engines drew closer until six Tornado, multi-role fighter- bombers, screamed over the hills. Three made simulated bombing runs on the enemy emplacement, dropping smoke flares which showed where the bombs would have fallen if it were for real.

The other three attacked the ships in the fjord. One aircraft towed a target, allowing the ships to perform air defence exercises as they launched live missiles; six soared into the air and one made a direct hit on the target and destroyed it.

The howitzers on the shore opened fire. It soon became clear they were targeting his group’s main camp. How did they know where it was?

The answer became apparent when the Captain came back with the news that they had apprehended a spotter, a mile from the camp. He had been taken prisoner and was being interrogated.

The battle raged for an hour until the adjudicators deemed the black forces had won that engagement, sinking one ship, two landing craft and decimating the landing forces. They also took two of three howitzers out of action.

Despite it being an exercise, Mike felt the surge of adrenaline. By the time they could take breakfast, he was ravenous.

The days continued with more exercises as the platoons defended their position and then went on the attack. After two weeks, it ended. Mike was exhausted but also exhilarated.

They had a day to wind down and prepare their kit for shipment. Instead of a long overland journey, their return home was via chartered ferries from Stavanger to Newcastle. It would still entail a full day on the road to reach Stavanger; the mountainous terrain exacerbated the distance, almost doubling it.

Once embarked on the ship and at sea, the Captain permitted the troops to use the bar, under the close supervision of the Sergeants. The men

celebrated the end of four weeks of hard work and the thought of home and families. The voyage would take over thirty-six hours and the men looked forward to a relaxing night's sleep. Two weeks of constant patrols, watches, and many battle scenarios, any time of day or night, had deprived them of a lot of rest.

Mike collapsed onto a camp bed after two pints of beer, ruing the fact he could not phone Hannah before leaving Norway. Sleep came fast and for the first time in weeks, or so it seemed, he dreamed.

They were strange dreams, verging on nightmares, of battles, death and injury. He awoke in a sweat. He put the dreams down to the experience of the past weeks, of simulated warfare with high realism.

The afternoon sun of the following day raised the east coast of England above the horizon. There was a small cheer from those taking time on deck. Mike wished it was the coast of Scotland.

It was a painfully slow three hours before they approached the outer limits of the port. Eventually, the order went out for the men to gather their kit and make their way to their respective vehicles. The call came early, and they sat in the vehicle hold for over an hour, in poor light with the smell of oil and fuel, before they even summoned the deckhands to their stations.

Once again, boredom set in. Mike nodded off for a time and awoke to engines being started. The loading door opened, and a dull light from a grey sky shone through.

Mike's vehicle moved and exited the ship. It then waited until all other vehicles were on the quayside. The faster vehicles set off, leaving behind the tank and artillery transports, Mike didn't envy them. Soon, their direction set towards Scotland.

Chapter 6

Mike and Hannah settled back into the routine of weekdays apart and most weekends together. His next foreign deployment was a few weeks in Germany in February.

They granted Mike leave for Christmas but had to be back on duty by New Year. Their love was mature enough even at this stage that they did not feel the need to impress each other with many gifts. Instead, they settled on one present each. Mike received an excellent quality watch from Hannah, and he bought her a slender gold necklace with a sapphire pendant. She loved it, and to Mike's delight it set off the beautiful lines of her exquisite neck perfectly.

They divided the time between each of their parents and all got together for a meal and a party before he returned to duty.

The New Year came and all too soon Mike was away again, but it was only a quick tour of a month's duration.

Once again, Mike was lucky to have leave for Easter, which coincided with Hannah's time off from college.

It was 1982.

In March, Argentinian scrap metal merchants landed at South Georgia, deep in the Southern Ocean. They raised the Argentinian flag. Apart from diplomatic protests, no one thought much of the incident. But on Friday, April 2nd, as Mike and Hannah watched television, the news announced the early morning invasion of the Falkland Islands by an Argentinian amphibious assault. Two hours after the initial incursion, another one-thousand Argentine troops landed and quickly overran the eighty-man Royal Marine garrison.

"Bloody hell!" said Mike.

"It looks bad," said Hannah.

"It does. I wonder what's going to happen."

They wouldn't have to wait long to find out.

The following day the UN Security Council demanded immediate withdrawal of Argentine forces. The Argentines took no notice of this

decision. Events unfolded rapidly from that point.

Late on Saturday afternoon, two Military Police arrived at Mike's home and informed him all personnel on leave were being recalled immediately. He was to be back at the barracks by Sunday morning latest.

"Oh, no!" said Hannah. "You've only been back a few of days."

"I know. But this is what I signed up for."

"Do you think you'll be going down there?"

"I've no idea. Guess they're just looking at all angles, having everything ready."

But they knew that a massive task force was already in the making, a fleet of ships, over one hundred, both Navy and civilian, were being made ready to sail. Three nuclear submarines were already on their way.

The SS Canberra was in Gibraltar when the Government informed her Captain she was being requisitioned as a troopship for the task force. They ordered her to Southampton with immediate effect to be quickly refitted.

The first ships sailed on April 5th, and the Canberra, nicknamed the Great White Whale, was ready to sail on April 9th. Mike was dispatched to Southampton to join her as part of four platoons from the Royal Regiment of Scotland, where they joined 3 Commando Brigade on the Canberra. The Brigade was made up of paratroopers, marines along with some naval auxiliary staff and some RAF helicopter pilots; almost four thousand troops in total.

Crowds gathered to wish the ship and her 'passengers' good luck as she commenced the nine-thousand nautical mile journey to the heart of the conflict.

As the Canberra sailed south, they practised anti-submarine manoeuvres and other military exercises, including RAS - replenishment at sea. The troops passed the time with drills and weapons maintenance. On 17th April, they arrived at Freetown in Sierra Leone for bunkering and freshwater supplies.

No one knew what the future held, and Mike could not contact Hannah. It was still unknown whether Canberra would deliver her troops to the Falklands, but a political settlement seemed a long way off.

The ship sailed on to Ascension Island where she lay at anchor for the next few days taking on stores, performing RAS drills and further anti-submarine manoeuvres. The military bosses decided that the ships at Ascension were under threat from underwater attack, and so from 25th

April Canberra would weigh anchor each evening and steam around overnight to minimise the threat.

Mike was glad they were being kept informed of developments and on May 2nd, the commanding officers summoned their troops to various parts of the ship to be told that a British submarine had sunk the veteran Argentine battle-cruiser, the General Belgrano.

A cheer went up, but the mood became more sombre when news broke that three-hundred-and-sixty-eight crew died on the vessel. This shocked both the task force and the British public and drew harsh criticism, especially from anti-war campaigners. They claimed it was outside the exclusion zone and sailing away from the conflict. British officials said the task force had the right to defend itself against any hostile vessel.

Life returned to relatively normal for two days until Captain McCoy summoned Mike's platoons again on the evening of May 4th.

"Gentlemen, I have grave news. This afternoon, an Exocet missile fired by an Argentine aircraft hit a Navy destroyer, HMS Sheffield.. Twenty sailors were killed and a couple of dozen more injured. The ship has since sunk."

"If any of you believe we at war against a tin-pot army, and that this conflict will be a walkover, think again. Keep your wits about you and take this seriously. Gentlemen, this is the real thing."

It shocked Mike. He knew little about the Navy, but a destroyer was a major warship, and the loss of life was appalling. No doubt it was in retaliation for the sinking of the General Belgrano.

It set the course of the war. There was to be no diplomatic solution.

On May 6th, Canberra weighed anchor and headed south from Ascension Island in convoy with other ships. They were two weeks steaming from the Falklands, which were now under air and sea attack from British forces. Each evening, as they drew closer, they gave the order to "darken ship" whereby all the lights - navigation, deck and cabin - were extinguished throughout the convoy.

The day before Canberra reached San Carlos Water, UN peace talks had failed after the Argentine junta rejected British proposals.

Canberra anchored in San Carlos Water on May 21st as part of the assault by British forces to retake the islands.

The stretch of water became known as 'bomb alley'. Over the next two days, a massive operation was underway to move troops, stores and equipment ashore and set up defensive Rapier batteries. They came under continual attack from enemy aircraft. Of the seven escort ships, five, HMS Antrim, Ardent, Argonaut, Brilliant and Broadsword, were hit; only HMS Plymouth and Yarmouth were unscathed. Of those taking hits, only Broadsword could fully continue the fight, while Ardent was ablaze and sinking.

Mike ferried ashore with his platoons, the first of many. As they moved the last men and equipment off the Canberra, conditions had become so hostile that Canberra, Norland and Europic Ferry were ordered to leave Falkland Sound by midnight on May 22nd. The civilian-manned RFA LSL's, (Royal Fleet Auxiliary Landing Ship Logistic) Sir Galahad, Sir Lancelot and Sir Bedivere remained to help ferry troops ashore.

On May 23rd Argentine bombs found Sir Bedivere, Sir Galahad and Sir Lancelot. None of those that struck the LSLs exploded. Damage to Sir Bedivere was minor, but Sir Galahad caught fire and was beached. It put her out of action for a week. Fires started on Sir Lancelot, which put it out of action until June 7th.

By May 27th, all the ships had been unloaded, over three thousand troops and one-thousand tons of supplies, leaving the two damaged LSL's at San Carlos. In the meantime, the British frigate Antelope was hit and later sunk, and the Argentines bombed the destroyer HMS Coventry, resulting in 20 deaths.

In Mike's mind, it was absolute chaos, men and machinery everywhere with occasional bombs detonating, many in the distance, but some close to their position. All he could do was obey the orders of his superiors; he had no idea how they knew what to do. Such skills of decision making under duress would come later in his career.

Canberra disappeared over the horizon. She would return several days later to discharge three-thousand troops which had transferred from the Queen Elizabeth 2 stationed in South Georgia. They too landed at San Carlos.

The following day the offensive began. Mike had his first taste of true action in the fierce battle to take Darwin and Goose Green. The engagement

lasted a day and a night. Seventeen of the vastly outnumbered British troops had been killed in the desperate fight. But they won the day and took over one thousand prisoners.

Mike was shocked at the state of them, many appeared to be only kids and their equipment was severely lacking; they were dishevelled and frightened.

Sergeant McKay began giving orders. He pointed to Mike and a dozen of his colleagues, “get these prisoners secured.”

There were about sixty. “What do we do with them, Sarge?” Mike asked.

“Get them behind that wall over there, hands on their heads and then three of you stand guard over them. Any nonsense out of them, tie them up.”

“Looks like you’re on guard duty, McDonald,” said Corporal Graves. “I’ll get you relieved in a couple of hours. We’ll get them fully secured tomorrow.”

Mike and two colleagues took up a position at three points surrounding the prisoners. He felt a strange responsibility in detaining these men.

One gestured for a cigarette, Mike thought he was asking him for one, he didn’t smoke. But the soldier had a supply. Mike saw no harm in it and nodded.

The soldier mimed that he needed a light.

“Hey Hamish, you got a light for the guy?”

“He’s a prisoner, he can piss off.”

“Come on, look at him, he’s scared shitless.”

“Yeah, no doubt their superiors concocted some gruesome stories of what we’d do to them if they were captured, all the better to make them fight. Arseholes.”

Mike was the same rank and service as Hamish and stood his ground. He took on a more demanding persona, “just give him a fucking light!”

“Okay, cool it, pal.”

Hamish pulled out his lighter and with an obvious grudge lit the lad’s cigarette.

Next, a dozen more of the prisoners wanted the same.

“See what you’ve done!”

“Does it matter? Just give them a break.”

Hamish gave a lad his lighter. He passed it to another.

“I want it back when you’re finished,” he shouted.

They would not understand his English, but perhaps his tone would get through to them.

With the victory over the Argentines at Darwin and Goose Green, the British forces at San Carlos were clear to begin their advance east towards Stanley. Marching with heavy packs on their backs across the peat bogs of East Falkland in poor weather, their progress was slow.

Mike’s platoon was fortunate. With responsibility for the prisoners, they had to wait until they could be properly held in a secure location.

This meant they would end up being ferried from San Carlos to Bluff Cove and Fitzroy, on the RFA LSL’s, for the southern offensive on Stanley.

Advance parties of the 2nd Battalion, Parachute Regiment had already moved forward and occupied Fitzroy and Bluff Cove. Units of the Welsh Guards and Scots Guards were sent in to support them, along with Mike’s platoon, which had become separated from the rest of the Royal Scots; Sergeant McKay was the most senior among them.

A Captain from the Welsh guards approached the Sergeant.

“What are you lads up to, Sergeant?”

“We got separated from the rest of our unit, bogged down with prisoners. The others are marching on Stanley.”

“Very well. Get your men on the Galahad, it will save you a long walk.”

It may save a walk, but fate had hell in store for the Sir Galahad.

“Come on then, men. You heard the Captain. Get in line for the supply craft going out to the ship.”

On the morning of June 8th, the Sir Galahad and the Sir Tristram anchored in Bluff Cove. Delays in unloading meant the ships were sitting ducks. The nuclear submarine, HMS Splendid, picked up two waves of fighter aircraft taking off from Rio Gallegos airport. The nuclear submarine HMS Valiant, on picket duty off Rio Grande, could track six Dagger fighters taking off from the airbase there for a complementary mission. They sent early warning signals, but the reports from the submarines failed to reach the British forces at Bluff Cove.

At 14:00 local time, five A-4 Skyhawks attacked the almost defenceless ships. Each carried three, 500 pound, retarding tail bombs of

Spanish design.

Three of the bombs make a direct hit on the Sir Galahad.

Mike's world was suddenly turned upside down. They were below deck when all the lights went out, to be replaced by sporadic red emergency lighting. The second bomb hit, and the ship trembled ominously.

Chaos reigned.

Shouts and screams filled the ship, followed by acrid smoke.

Another bomb hit and Mike's ears were ringing. The thought passed through his mind that he would never see Hannah again.

He had never been so scared.

"Follow me!" said Corporal Graves. "We need to reach the deck. Each man grab the belt of the man in front, stay together!"

The smoke and noise confused Mike's sense of direction.

They entered a passageway. The sky shone through an enormous hole blasted through the side of the ship by one bomb. Three bodies lay nearby. The Corporal checked them and shook his head.

"Nothing we can do here, men, keep moving."

They rose upwards through two stairwells and burst into the daylight. The sky had disappeared, filled with thick black smoke. Another explosion rocked the ship, but they heard no aircraft; it was an ammunition store going up.

Three crew members ran up, bloodied but relatively unharmed, two were members of the ethnic Chinese crew.

The English sailor shouted, "to the life rafts, she's gonna go down!"

By now, men, many supporting injured colleagues or carrying bodies on stretchers, flooded the deck. All his platoon's men were accounted for with nothing more than cuts and scrapes.

Crew members lowered lifeboats and discharged life-rafts into the water. Then they hung rope ladders over the side. Fires were now raging out of control and working towards them while muted explosions occurred below deck. Mike wanted to be off the ship.

They allocated two life rafts to Mike's platoon and they scrambled down the rope ladders like the devil was at their heels.

Mike collapsed on the floor of the raft, coughing and gasping for breath.

"We'll be okay now, lads," said the Sergeant.

He spoke too soon.

At first, the life rafts drifted away from the blazing ship. Then, suddenly, a breeze blew them back. Royal Navy helicopters were hovering in the black smoke over the ship, attempting to lift off men in peril. The flying was astounding and brave.

One pilot noticed the plight of the life-rafts and moved towards them. With precision flying, the pilot manoeuvred his helicopter so that the downdraft once again blew the rafts away from the stricken ship.

Soon they were clear and safe. Smaller landing craft began rounding up the rafts like mother ducks, taking them in tow towards the shore.

As they arrived, medics were standing in wait for injured men, thigh deep in freezing water. Along with other soldiers, they hauled the life-rafts to the beach.

Mike and his colleagues stumbled onto the shore. Many were not so fortunate as dozens of men came out of life-rafts and landing craft with horrendous injuries; there were missing limbs, awful burns, and body bags.

Mike was dazed, both with what had happened on the ship and at the carnage he was seeing among so many men. Shouts, screams, and cries brought about by pain that Mike could not comprehend, filled the air.

He wandered around.

“Where you off to, MacDonald?”

It was the Corporal, but Mike barely heard his words. He mumbled back, “going for a walk.”

A medic stopped him. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

Mike carried on, aimlessly, among the wounded and the dead. A face caught his eye and he walked towards the man.

“Dave?”

The man’s eyes turned towards Mike.

“Yeah.” The voice was weak.

“Dave, it’s Mike, Mike MacDonald.”

Both had been in the Army Cadets before joining up and had been at school together.

Mike was shocked. Dave’s left leg was missing, and he had substantial burns.

“Oh, no,” he whispered. “Medic! Over here!”

He knelt by Dave’s side and took his hand.

“Hey pal, got yourself into a bit of a mess, eh?”

Dave managed a faint smile.

“You’ll be okay.”

A medic appeared and examined Dave. He looked Mike in the eye and shook his head.

“Help him!” Mike shouted.

“He’s too far gone, fella.”

“You must be able to do something?”

“Morphine, that’s it. He needs a priest, not a doctor.”

The medic dosed Dave up with morphine.

“Sorry, I have others to deal with, those who have a chance.”

He walked away.

Mike couldn’t understand that nothing could be done, but knew he was powerless.

“Dave, you feel better now?”

“Yeah, a bit.” He spoke through clenched teeth. Even morphine couldn’t quell the pain.

“We’ll get you out of here.”

“Come on, Mike. It’s over.”

“No!”

“It’s too late, pal. Look after yourself.”

Dave’s body shook, his eyes closed, and he took one last shuddering breath.

Under a blackened sky, among the living, the dead, and the dying, Mike had lived through the most traumatic experience of his life.

Gently, he folded Dave’s arms across his chest and placed his helmet over his face. He looked like he was sleeping.

In a state of mild shock, he whispered a final fair well to Dave, stood, and walked away.

Another fifty-five men, who had been aboard the Sir Galahad, died that day.

By June 14th, the British had recaptured Port Stanley, and hostilities officially ended on June 20th. Mike returned home once more onboard the SS Canberra. As she approached Southampton waters, tired and rust-stained, small boats of every shape and size appeared to escort Canberra to her Berth 106 home and aircraft flew overhead.

The Royal Marines band played on the forward flight deck as more and more boats, passenger craft and even canoes came out to greet the ship. Fire tugs fired jets of water in all directions.

Every few minutes, Canberra's steam whistle boomed across the water and a chorus of hooters and whistles replied and were heard among the now huge flotilla surrounding her and far inland.

People tied homemade banners to railings which they held up for the TV cameras, whilst those on the riverbanks and quayside waved and cheered. As the ship neared her berth, a mass of people lined the quay. The police lost count after thirty-five thousand. Many were relatives of returning soldiers - waving flags and crying.

The band of the Royal Marines played Land of Hope & Glory as the ship got closer to her berth, accompanied by the voices of 2500 marines and those onshore.

Among those tearfully waiting on the shore side was Hannah, along with hers and Mike's parents. The reunion was one of tears, rejoicing and thankfulness.

Mike never told Hannah about the death of Dave and the effect it had on him, at least not for many years. But the incident had scarred Mike's soul. In time, the pain of the memory would fade, though it would never go away, it would lie dormant, along with future traumas, until a time in the distant future . . .

Chapter 7

Shortly after Mike's return from the Falklands, they started to plan their wedding. They settled on September 15th when the weather still had a chance of being fair, though that could never be guaranteed even in mid-summer in Scotland.

It was to be a lavish affair. The marriage ceremony would take place at Bearsden All Saints, Scottish Episcopal Church, a venue both families were familiar with having used it as a place of worship occasionally. Hannah knew the Rector well, having attended Sunday school there for many years.

With drinks and nibbles in a local pub followed by an evening party to include food for all guests at Sherbrooke Castle, it would be an expensive affair. But Stuart and Claire, Hannah's parents, promised to foot a large part of the cost, willingly given as tribute to their only daughter; they wanted her to have a day to remember.

Mike and Hannah rued their decision to plan it so soon once they realised the vast amount of planning that went into such a function. But as the day approached, everything fell into place and they wound down during the last week before the event.

Both arranged what to wear for the ceremony and kept their choices secret from each other. When the day arrived and Mike made his way to the head of the church to stand in front of the Rector and await Hannah's arrival, there were wide eyes and dropped jaws from the women in the congregation. Mike wore a magnificent dress kilt, shirt and jacket, adorned with his regimental insignia. He walked tall and proud with a subtle, boyish smile on his face. He was, without doubt, the most handsome man in the church and attracted the envious eyes of several young, and some older, women.

But when Hannah entered, there were audible gasps. She looked radiant and stunning in a dress which could have been made for a princess. Cream silk and lace showed off her perfectly formed body, and the long trail had to be carried by four bridesmaids.

A lump came to Mike's throat. He was mesmerised as he watched her walk up the aisle.

Hannah lifted her veil and gave Mike a smile which made him weak at the knees. Not for the first time, he felt he was the luckiest man on the planet. His love for Hannah was overflowing, blurring all other thoughts.

The Rector spoke.

Mike slowly came back to earth.

With the words of the ceremony complete and rings exchanged, Mike turned to Hannah and kissed her. She tasted of apple and peach. He could have melted into her there and then.

The organ played again, and then the couple turned to face the congregation. It was a sea of beaming smiles. At the back, a dozen or more of his colleagues, in dress uniform, moved outside as Mike and Hannah started a slow walk to the entrance.

At the threshold, the Rector shook Mike's hand and kissed Hannah's, wishing them well.

Before them, there was a military guard of honour, his colleagues arranged in two lines with swords raised at forty-five degrees, forming a tunnel to walk through.

"Oh, Mike," Hannah purred, "This is so wonderful."

Mike nodded at each of his comrades as he passed by. When they had passed through the guard, the soldiers lowered their swords and in unison gave the couple three cheers of 'hip hip hooray'.

There were tears in Hannah's eyes.

"Mike, you've made me so happy."

"I hope I always will, darling."

He gave her a long and deep kiss to more cheers from his colleagues.

"You're showing off now," said Hannah, once she could catch her breath.

"Can you blame me? There are guys here who would die to be in my position right now. You are gorgeous."

"Oh, Mike."

Next came the photography session, a seemingly endless round of varying groups of people posing before the camera. He saw people becoming restless and wanting to move on. He did too. But all understood the importance of capturing the moment, never to be seen again.

Hannah felt as if she was walking on air. Most of the attention was on her and she felt the love from Mike, her family, and friends, including many of Mike's colleagues who she now knew well.

The late summer sun shone on her face and its glow lit up her skin, she could feel its warmth as she basked in the love surrounding her.

Mike had not let go of her hand since leaving the church. When the photographer requested a picture of Mike with his father and then the best man, his hand leaving hers caused a void in her heart. It was made up for by the first full-frontal sight of Mike in his dress uniform. He looked gorgeous and had an enormous smile, one that had not left his face since Hannah entered the church. He looked into her eyes as he put his arm around his best man and winked at her. He was right back in her heart again.

Maggie approached and took her hand.

"What a lovely ceremony, darling. I'm so happy for you and Mike. Doesn't he look wonderful?"

"He does, and he's all mine. It's all so wonderful." She squeezed Maggie's hand.

"Honey, there are tears in your eyes."

Hannah sniffled. "It just it's the most wonderful day of my life."

"Hey, baby. You look fantastic!"

"Aw, thanks, dad. And thanks for all this, too."

"Oh, we had a little help from Mike's parents."

"I know you paid for most of it. Thank you."

She stood on her toes and kissed her father's cheek.

"I guess I won't be getting many goodnight kisses from here on."

"I'm sure Mike won't mind." She giggled.

With the photography session finished, people dispersed.

"Ready to move on?" said Mike.

"Sure, time to head to the pub."

Mike lead her to the waiting white Rolls Royce and opened the door for her.

"After you, my love."

She smiled at him and paused for a kiss after putting one foot in the car. The kiss lingered and Mike put an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

"Mike! You're hard!"

"I can't help it, you look lovely."

“Later, darling. I’ll be all yours. In the meantime, we have people to entertain.”

Mike gave a mock pout and released her.

In the back of the car, she put her head on his shoulder and sighed. Her head was still spinning.

“Okay, honey?”

“I am. Fabulous.”

She was feeling more relaxed after the formality of the ceremony, but knew she would be the star for the next few hours

After a few hours at the pub, they retired to Mike’s parent’s house to prepare for the evening.

“I’m going to get out of this dress for a while.”

“You’re going to wear it this evening?”

“Only for a while, while I have the first dance with you.”

She squeezed his hand.

“Then I’ll change into something more comfortable. How about you?”

“I’ll stay as I am. Kilts are comfortable.”

“I’m glad, you look wonderful, so handsome.”

“Thank you, honey. I’m going to have a brief kip, it’s going to be a long night, I think. Care to join me?”

“No hanky-panky?”

“I promise.”

They undressed and cuddled up on the bed. Before they knew it, the alarm went off and soon after, Maggie was calling them.”

“You two ready?”

“Twenty minutes, mum,” Mike called back.

The same car picked them up for the journey to the hotel. As they approached it, Hannah had butterflies in her stomach. All eyes and attention would be on her again, some for Mike too..

But it was Mike who received the first attention as the only people outside the hotel were his colleagues, still in uniform, waiting to greet him. They took off their hats and waved them in an informal salute, each shaking Mike’s hand. Then they turned their eyes on Hannah, who offered her hand for each to kiss.

Inside the hotel, the other guests cheered as the couple entered. All took their places at the tables and enjoyed a sumptuous three-course meal.

Mike and his best-man made speeches, and Hannah's father made the final one. He had his audience roaring with laughter with tales of Hannah's childhood.

Then it was time for the first dance. Mike and Hannah took to the floor to the strains of 'Unchained Melody', one of their favourite love songs.

"I love you in a kilt, Mike. You should wear it more often."

"I'm glad. I don't get many opportunities to wear it though."

"Well, you could wear it at home if you like, it would be a sure way to get me into bed." She giggled.

"Well, if that's the case." He kissed her mouth.

They danced close and slow for a few minutes, then Mike waved to the rest of the party, indicating they should all join them on the dance floor.

After the first song, the DJ played some more upbeat music. Soon the party was in full swing.

Hannah delighted as the younger children began to dance. They had no inhibitions, unlike some grown-ups who were a little too self-conscious.

Between dances, Hannah and Mike circulated amongst the guests and made sure they gave a few minutes to everyone.

It was an exhausting evening between the dancing, drinking, and demands of their guests, but they both enjoyed every moment.

Late in the evening, some older guests departed, followed by those with young children, eventually leaving a small hard-core of close friends and family. The drinking continued, but the dancing grew less, though Hannah continued to drag Mike up for some slow dances, giving them a few moments together to cuddle and kiss.

By the time midnight came, people were becoming tired and worse-the-wear from drink. It had been a long day.

The last guests bade their farewells, leaving only Mike, Hannah, and their parents.

"That was a hell of a day, son," said Stuart.

Mike took joy in being called 'son' by his father-in-law. "It has, dad. Fabulous. Thank you so much."

"The least I could do for my precious daughter. I know you'll take care of her, but it's a bitter-sweet moment, losing her, but to a great guy."

"Aw, thanks."

"You're not losing me, dad," said Hannah.

“Things won’t be quite the same between us hon, you’re not my little girl anymore.”

“I haven’t been for a long time, dad.” She glanced at Mike and giggled.

Stuart smiled and kiss her cheek. “You’ll always be our baby.”

“Where are you heading tomorrow?” Maggie asked.

“We’re off to a lovely cottage on Skye for a few days, mum,” said Mike.

“Oh, that will be lovely.”

“Enjoy,” said Adrian.

“We will,” said Hannah.

She had a whimsical look in her eyes and Mike knew exactly what she was thinking.

“Well, I think that’s a cue for wrapping up,” said Mike. “We want to get an early ferry out tomorrow, make the best of it.”

“Of course,” said Stuart. “I’ll call the minibus I booked to get us all home. He said he would be flexible to call anytime, so we shouldn’t have to wait long.”

“One more drink while we wait?” said Mike.

“Why not,” said Adrian.

Hannah sidled up to Mike and whispered into his ear. “I don’t think I’ll be getting my conjugal rights tonight, eh?”

“Perhaps not,” he whispered back. “But we’ll make up for it tomorrow.”

She smiled and squeezed his hand.

Chapter 8

Mike and Hannah enjoyed a week away, then he had to return to duty. They settled into married life apart with plans to rent a small flat in Edinburgh soon when Hannah finished college.

In the meantime, they set up home with Claire and Stuart, who had the larger house. The arrangement worked well with Hannah's parents being very welcoming and giving them the opportunity for time on their own when Mike was home at weekends.

But an icy storm would soon destroy their tranquillity.

Conveniently, when Mike had an extended Bank Holiday weekend to spend with Hannah, Stuart and Claire decided to visit some friends near Birmingham.

Mike and Hannah had the house to themselves for the duration and took every opportunity to act like a married couple, cooking meals and enjoying the physical side of their relationship to the full. They also had a good night out on Saturday, ending with a restaurant meal.

On Sunday they had a cosy night in and watched a film, Mike didn't have to be back at barracks until Tuesday. When the film ended, the late-night news came on. Mike and Hannah paid little attention to it, the usual depressing stuff, including a flash report of a bad motorway accident on the M6.

"Enough, nothing but bad things on here. I've got a better idea of what to do with our time," Hannah gave Mike her intoxicating smile and giggle.

"I like what you're thinking, darling," said Mike.

"Take me to bed."

He finished his drink and then took her hand, leading her up the stairs.

They made love for the umpteenth time that weekend. With weekdays apart, Hannah couldn't keep her hands off him when he was at home.

Mike had no complaints.

The following morning, they were awoken to loud banging at the front door.

“Who on earth could that be?” said Hannah.

Mike put on a dressing gown. “I’ll go look.”

He opened the door to face two police officers, one male, one female.

“Is this the Campbell household?”

“It is. What’s the problem?”

“Could we ask who you are?” said the female police officer.

“I’m Mike McDonald, I’m married to Mr and Mrs Campbells daughter.”

“I see. Is the daughter in? I’m told her name is Hannah?”

“Yes, she’s still in bed.”

“May we come in? We have some bad news, Mike.”

“What’s happened?”

“You need to prepare yourself. Perhaps we should wait until Hannah comes down?”

Only the female officer had spoken. She had a gentle voice, but it had a foreboding edged.

Mike felt vulnerable. What is going on?

“I’ll get her.”

Mike went to the bedroom. Hannah was sitting up in bed.

“What is it, Mike?” She wore a concerned frown on her face.

“I don’t know. There are two police officers downstairs, they want to speak to you.”

A chill ran through Hannah’s bones.

Mike saw a dark shadow pass across her face.

Unsteadily, she dressed in slacks and a t-shirt. She held Mike’s hand.

“I’ve got a bad feeling.”

Mike lead her down the stairs.

The female officer greeted her. “I’m PC Alison Grey. I think you should sit down, Miss Campbell.”

“Mrs McDonald,” Hannah corrected. “Hannah.”

“Of course, Mike said you were married, I’m sorry. Please sit.”

“What is it, why are you here?” Hannah’s voice trembled.

Alison spoke quietly but firmly. “Hannah, there was a terrible accident last night. Both your parents have been

killed in a motorway accident late last night. I'm sorry. One of their friends survived and gave us your address."

Hannah's face was blank, her brain refusing to accept the information.

"Oh, my God. That news flash!"

Then she fell to pieces. She screamed and then cried endless tears.

The floor fell from Mike's world.

Nothing in life had prepared him for the torrent of emotion he was feeling, not even his friend, Dave Green, dying in his arms in the Falklands. His wife was in meltdown. Her grief must be unbearable. He didn't know what to do.

He moved and sat beside her. She put her head on his shoulder and her chest heaved as sobs shook her entire body. Soon her tears soaked his shirt.

"Is there anyone else we can call," said Alison.

Mike's tears were flowing now too. But for a moment he pulled himself together.

"Yes, my mother, Maggie."

"Okay, can I have her number?"

Mike took out a small notebook, flicked through the pages until he found his mum's number, then handed it to Alison.

"I'll call her. Is it okay for me to tell her what has happened, or do you want to tell her?"

Mike wiped his face. "Tell her everything, please."

"Okay."

Within twenty minutes, Maggie was at the door. She walked in with tears streaming down her face.

"Oh Hannah, oh Mike."

She sat on the other side of Hannah to Mike.

"I'm so sorry, darling. This is terrible."

Alison spoke. "Mrs McDonald, are you happy for us to leave you now? There is nothing more we can do here."

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

The two police officers quietly left the house.

Hannah was inconsolable and took time off from college. Her world had fallen apart. Though in lucid moments, she wondered where she would be without Mike and Maggie. If this had happened a year ago, she had no close family nearby and no siblings. She shuddered at the thought.

Mike got a few days of compassionate leave and could stay until the following Monday. He did not know how he was going to pick up the pieces.

Maggie and Adrian were a rock for the couple. They did everything possible to make Hannah feel loved and that their family was now hers, that she wasn't alone.

By the end of the week, she came to terms with the situation, though the pain was far from over.

At the funeral, she collapsed, and Mike had to hold her up. He worried about her. He had to return to work.

“Don't worry, Mike. We'll look after her.”

They followed through on their promise and soon Hannah was calling them mum and dad.

She spent most of her time at Maggie and Adrian's house. The memories at hers were too painful to be on her own there. Mike returned home every weekend. It was fortunate that his next foreign deployment was still two months away.

In the ensuing time, Hannah came back to the world and to Mike. Life returned almost to normal, though they set up home with Maggie and Adrian until they decided what to do with her parent's house.

But life goes, and life comes back. Hannah found herself pregnant for the first time. She was overjoyed, and the new focus helped her deal with her grief.

“Despite everything, we have so much to look forward to,” said Mike.

“We do.” Hannah gave the biggest smile he had seen from her in a long time.

END

About the Author

Robert lives in the windswept Isle of Man with his partner and an extended family of crazy but lovable dogs and cats.

Writer, engineer, adventurer, sailor, and free thinker, he engages his overactive mind in the world of stories and loves creating tales of adventure with sub-plots, intrigue and love, whether psychological thrillers, science fiction, or general fiction.

When not writing, working at his day job, or in his preferred state of sailing in the Scottish Hebrides, he can be found walking hills and glens, pondering the meaning of life and the universe. He also exists at <https://robertjepson.com>

Read more at [Robert Jepson's site](#).