

The Girl I Left Behind Me

A Novel

By

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Before You Start

On The Structure Of Units In The British Army

To the lay person the British Army is a strange and mysterious place. Its structures and terminology provide a common frame of reference for those inside the organisation, but are a foreign language to those who are unfamiliar with the military way of life. This foreword and the Glossary below it are aimed at assisting the lay person to understand the jargon and the organisational structures that are used in this book. This explanation is based on current British Army practice and some ex-servicemen may see differences from the time when they served.

The smallest recognised formation in an infantry unit is the section. It's made up of eight men split into two fire teams of four men each, a Charlie team led by a Corporal and a Delta team led by a Lance Corporal, who is also second in command of the section, or 2IC. Both fire teams are similarly equipped with the Corporal/Lance Corporal plus one rifleman armed with 5.56 mm SA80 rifles, another rifleman armed with a 7.62 mm light machine gun and the fourth rifleman with a 5.56 mm light support weapon.

Three sections combined make up a Platoon of 24 men, which is commanded by a junior officer with a sergeant as his 2IC. Junior Officers are, in ascending order of rank, Second Lieutenant, Lieutenant and Captain. For identification purposes platoons are traditionally numbered 1 to 4.

A Company is made up of four Platoons, with a Major commanding it. He will be assisted by a Company Sergeant Major and may have runners, a driver and a Quartermaster Sgt at his disposal. His second in command is the senior most Platoon commander who is usually a Captain. Across the companies will be a spread of specialist teams such as mortar, machine gun and reconnaissance platoons. In addition there will be individual soldiers trained to carry out specific tasks, such as snipers, first aid and EOD.

A Battalion is made up of four rifle companies, identified as A, B, C and D, and a headquarters company. The commanding officer is a Lieutenant Colonel, assisted by his 2IC who will be a Major, the Regimental Sergeant Major, responsible for discipline and ceremonial, and a wide range of specialist trades such as medical, intelligence, technical, communications, quartermaster and administration. Armoured units are called regiments rather than battalions and their companies are called squadrons.

Confusingly an infantry regiment is one that has one or more battalions. In this story C Company is part of the 2nd Battalion the Middlesex Regiment, which implies that there is also a 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment. An infantry regiment is commanded by a Colonel, which is an administrative and ceremonial role rather than an operational command and is often combined with another duty, such as Staff Officer or Garrison Commander. A complete regiment will often include battalions made up of reservists, part time soldiers who are members of the Territorial Army.

In operational terms two or more battalions under the same command make up a Brigade, commanded by a Brigadier. To assist him he will have a Chief of Staff, usually a full Colonel who is also the 2IC. The Chief of Staff leads a number of staff officers, designated G1 to G9. G1, for example, is responsible for personnel, G2 for intelligence and security, etc. In some

circumstances one officer may combine two or more staff responsibilities. The Brigadier will also have direct command over a number of embedded units such as artillery, logistics, communications and engineers.

Brigades are normally designated mechanised or armoured. A Mechanised Brigade is made up of at least two mechanised infantry battalions and one armoured regiment, while an Armoured Brigade has at least two armoured regiments and one infantry battalion. Mechanised means that the soldiers are equipped with armoured fighting vehicles that transport them to the battlefield, though to win the battle they will inevitably have to put 'boots on the ground'.

Two or more Brigades under a single command form a Division, commanded by a Major General. The Divisional headquarters is organised in a similar manner to a Brigade though the staff officers will usually be of more senior rank. The Divisional Commander will also have additional resources available to him, including units from the Army Air Corps who will provide aerial reconnaissance and ground attack capability. Divisions are designated as Armoured or Infantry depending on the mix of brigades that make them up.

At the time that the story was set in, the end of 2012, there was one Mechanised Brigade deployed in Afghanistan. It was made up of four infantry battalions plus an armoured regiment operating in an infantry and reconnaissance role. There were also a wide variety of embedded and support units. To enhance its capabilities the Brigade also had command over units normally seen only at divisional level, such as helicopters and the field hospital. The Royal Air Force and Royal Navy also had a considerable presence in the country, bringing the total strength of British forces in theatre to around 9,500.

Communications

In the fog of war it is important that everyone is able to communicate with and identify everyone else, especially over the radio where voices might not be immediately recognisable. In times past a platoon might only have one radio available to communicate with higher authority, but with the advent of more modern communications equipment all soldiers in a unit now carry a personal role radio (PRR), allowing 100% levels of communications. Command vehicles and Headquarters units have the capability to communicate both upwards and downwards along the chain of command using different radio networks.

To reduce confusion over identities there is a call-sign system. For the purposes of this story the C Company call-sign is Shark. The platoon call-signs are: 1 Platoon: Catfish, 2: Dogfish, 3: Swordfish and 4: Angelfish. The three sections within 1 Platoon are designated Catfish 1, 2 and 3. Within the sections the soldiers are each numbered off with the Corporal being 1, the Lance Corporal being 2, and the six privates being 3 to 8. For the purposes of this story the two man crew of the section Mastiff vehicle are designated alpha and bravo. To identify themselves over the radio each soldier will refer to himself by the section call-sign plus his own number, eg Catfish one one, Catfish one two, etc. Call-signs are also sometimes used in everyday conversation as a form of shorthand to indicate which bit of the organisation is being discussed or to identify an individual or group.

Glossary

2IC	Second in command
AK-47	An assault rifle capable of single shot or automatic fire. 7.62 mm calibre fed from a thirty round magazine. The weapon of choice of most of the world's terrorist groups.
Apache	Boeing AH-64 ground attack helicopter used by the British and US armies. It's capable of carrying rockets and anti-tank missiles and is equipped with a 30 mm calibre M230 Chain Gun.
Barracks	The permanent base of a military unit, comprising domestic accommodation for both single and married soldiers, administration and training buildings, armoury, storage buildings and workshops. Very often named after a significant military figure, eg Wellington Barracks in London. A building providing domestic accommodation for unmarried soldiers is a barrack block, while SNCOs and Officers live in the Sergeants and Officers messes respectively.
Boot Neck	British Army slang for Royal Marines, originally used by sailors referring to the high leather stock that formed part of the marine's uniform in the 17th and 18th centuries.
Bundu	Often spelt and pronounced as bondu. Slang for any uninhabited and non-cultivated land. Probably originating in South Africa from a Bantu word meaning wilderness
Capt	Captain.
CCTV	Closed circuit television.
Chinook	Boeing CH-47 heavy lift helicopter used by the RAF and American armed forces for cargo and troop carrying operations. Its design is distinctive in that it has a tandem rotor arrangement with one rotor mounted over the front of the aircraft and one over the tail, rather than the traditional mid fuselage single rotor blade assembly with a smaller vertically mounted stabilising rotor at the rear.
Civvie(s)	Slang: civilian personnel. Often used as a derogatory term. Can also be applied to a soldier's non-uniform clothing as in 'wearing his civvies'.
CO	Commanding Officer, normally of a battalion or regiment.

COS	Chief of Staff, the chief administrator in a Brigade or Divisional HQ.
Cpl	Corporal.
Crabs	Slang name used by the Army and Navy to refer to the Royal Air Force.
CSM	Company Sergeant Major, Warrant Officer II rank.
Drone	See RPV.
EOD	Explosives ordinance disposal - bomb disposal.
FOB	Forward operating base.
G2	Staff officer responsible for intelligence and security.
G3	Staff Officer responsible for operations.
Garrison	A geographic area providing infrastructure, eg barracks, for a large number of soldiers, usually in different units. It may consist of a number of different estates spread around the geographic area and can be quite extensive. Catterick Garrison, for example, houses around 12,000 soldiers and their families.
Glasshouse	Slang name for a military prison. The only one remaining in Britain is at Colchester Garrison.
GPMG	General purpose machine gun, 7.62 mm calibre, belt fed. See also jimpy
Hesco TM	Large diameter wire mesh baskets, 3 to 4 ft tall, that can be filled with rubble to form a defensive barrier.
HMG	Heavy machine gun. 12.7 mm calibre belt fed. Can be mounted on a tripod or fixed to a vehicle. Has an effective range up to 2 km.
HQ	Headquarters.
IC	When used by officers it mean 'In Command'. When used by an NCO (see below) it normally means 'in charge'.
IED	Improvised explosive device, which includes roadside bombs and booby traps. There is no set design for an IED and each bomb maker will design his own.
Int Corps	Intelligence Corps. The branch of the British Army responsible for the gathering and analysis of military intelligence. Also takes the tri-service lead on security matters.
Intel	Intelligence – information on enemy forces: strength, leadership, weapons, tactics, training and morale and also on the operational environment: terrain, infrastructure, local population etc. all of which supports the commander in his strategic or tactical decision making.

ISAF	International Security Assistance Force, forces from countries across the world that have agreed to provide military support to the Afghan government. The USA and Britain are the two largest contributors.
Jackal	A lightly armoured patrol vehicle with a crew of two, a driver and a gunner and room for a passenger.
Jimpy	Slang for GPMG (see above).
Klik(s)	Slang for kilometre(s), sometimes also abbreviated as 'k'.
LASM	Light Anti-Structure Missile. An unguided rocket fired from a single shot telescopic tube. The rocket buries its head in the wall of the structure before the explosive warhead detonates, which makes a bigger breach than if it exploded on impact.
LCpl	Lance Corporal.
Lt	Lieutenant
LMG	Light machine gun, 7.62 mm calibre, magazine fed.
Long	Also 'The Long'. Nickname for the L115A3 Long Range Rifle used by snipers in the British Army. 8.59 mm calibre, bolt action, capable of a range of 1,100 metres, about three times the effective range of an SA80 rifle.
LSW	The SA-80 A2 LSW is a light support weapon with a 5.56 mm calibre. It differs from the standard SA-80 rifle (see below) by having a longer barrel length and a bipod stand to provide greater accuracy.
Maj	Major.
Mastiff	An armoured truck capable of transporting a complete section. It also has a crew of two, a driver and a gunner.
Medivac	Medical evacuation.
Merlin	Augusta Westland AW101 medium lift helicopter. Originally purchased as an anti-submarine platform for the Royal Navy it was drafted into RAF service as a stop gap to make up for the perceived shortfall in helicopter capability in Iraq and Afghanistan.
MoD	Ministry of Defence, the arm of Government responsible for administering the British armed forces.
Mortar	A small bomb fired from a tube that has its base resting on the ground. The bomb has a small explosive charge in its base to act as its propellant. The bomb is dropped down the barrel of the mortar tube and the striking of the cartridge on a firing pin fires it.

Especially useful for indirect fire over objects such as walls, or for firing out of a trench. Mortars come in three calibres: 51 (obsolescent), 60 and 81 mm. The last is a specialist weapon and wouldn't be expected to be seen at battalion level. They can be used to fire explosive, smoke or illuminating rounds (flares). Ranges extend from 800 metres to around 5,500 metres depending on calibre.

MP	Military Police. On military bases they have similar powers to civilian police officers. Off base in the UK they would normally act through the local constabulary.
NAAFI	Navy, Army and Air Force Institute. A 'not for profit' business employed by the MoD to provide bars, cafeterias and shops for service personnel. Now mainly operating on overseas bases and replaced in the UK by contract catering companies.
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer. There are seven NCO ranks in the army which are, in ascending order: Lance Corporal, Corporal, Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, Colour Sergeant, Warrant Officer II (CSM, see above), Warrant Officer I (RSM, see below)
OC	Officer Commanding, usually of a formation smaller than a battalion.
O Group	Orders Group – a briefing for soldiers about to take part in an operation.
Op or Operation	Anything from a minor combat or non-combat mission up to a major on-going conflict may be called an operation. Usually assigned a code word (see Op HERRICK below) to disguise the meaning and also to provide shorthand for everyday use. The code words themselves are often unclassified but security caveats, eg 'Secret', may be applied to their meaning. Operation names are usually printed in block capitals so they stand out in written communications. To differentiate an operation from an exercise the latter are assigned two word codenames.
Op HERRICK	The codename applied to the overarching military operations being conducted by British forces in Afghanistan.
OpSec	Operational Security; the security arrangements for operating in the field including radio protocols.

Orderly Officer	A Warrant Officer or junior commissioned officer who takes effective command of the unit outside of normal working hours. It is normally a 24 hour duty allocated by rota.
PAF	Pakistan Air Force.
Panther	An armoured command vehicle.
Pit or pit space	Slang: the bed space that a soldier has allocated to him in a barracks.
Pioneers	Part of the RLC (see below) who carry out a range of operational battlefield support tasks, including construction and demolition.
Pvt	Private, the lowest rank in the army. Trooper is used for cavalry soldiers and there are other terms that stem from the specialist nature of the soldiers work, eg Sapper for an engineer, Signaller for a member of the Royal Signals, etc. There are also terms used as a matter of regimental tradition, eg Fusilier for soldiers in Fusilier regiments.
QM or Quartermaster	The officer in a unit, usually a Major, responsible for providing the equipment that soldiers require to live and fight. He is also responsible for accommodation and catering. QMs are often long serving soldiers promoted from the non-commissioned ranks. Most units also have a quartermaster of Sergeant rank in each company to allow them to operate independently.
R & R	Rest and recreation. A short period of rest away from the battle front, usually no longer than a week.
Rag Heads	Derogatory term. Originally used to refer to Iraqis it is now also used to refer to Afghan insurgents.
RAO	Regimental Administration Officer or Regimental Administration Office.
RAF	Royal Air Force
Redcaps	Slang: Military Police. So called because their peaked caps have a bright red covering. When they wear a beret it is crimson in colour.
Recce	Reconnaissance. The process of gathering intelligence through direct observation of the enemy or terrain.
RHQ	Regimental Headquarters
RLC	Royal Logistics Corps. Formed in 1993 by merging the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, Royal Corps of Transport, Royal Pioneer Corps and Army Catering Corps. The branch of the army responsible for re-supply, transport, catering and pioneer support.

RoE	Rules of Engagement. A set of rules based on British and International law that describes the circumstances under which British forces may use deadly force. Other nationalities in ISAF may use different RoE based on their own law.
Roulement	The routine deployment of troops on operational duties, usually to relieve a unit already in place.
RP	Regimental Police. Members of the battalion given some police training in order to act as constables within the barracks. They hold powers of arrest over military personnel of junior rank but not civilians.
RPG	Rocket propelled grenade. An unguided explosive projectile fired from a tube that is rested on the shoulder for firing. Originally of Russian manufacture it is in common use by terrorist groups.
RPV	Remotely piloted vehicle, a drone. Predator drones are unarmed, while Reaper drones can carry bombs, rockets and/or missiles.
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major, the senior most NCO in a battalion or regiment. He is responsible for discipline within the unit and also for the organisation of ceremonial occasions.
RV	Also RVP, rendezvous and rendezvous point. A place to which soldiers will return if they are separated from each other.
Sangar	A temporary fortification usually constructed of sand bags. Can have a roof, usually made of canvass or corrugated iron sheets. Generally square in design and capable of housing two to four men. If the floor is dug out to provide extra depth then it may also be referred to as a weapons pit or fire pit.
SAS	Special Air Service, an elite unit in the British Army.
SA80	The SA80 A2 rifle is the standard infantry weapon used by the British Army and can be used to fire single shots or in automatic mode to fire bursts. It has a 5.56 mm calibre and is fed from a magazine holding 30 rounds. The SA80 A2 UGL is fitted with an under slung grenade launcher. Each fire team will have one of these issued.
SBS	Special Boat Service, the Royal Marines' equivalent to the SAS.
Scrim	Also scrim net. A net with a mesh about the same size as that used for a football goal, with scraps of coloured

material attached to provide camouflage. The net is draped over poles above and around objects to disguise their shape and colour and to help them blend in with their background.

SDU	Situation display unit, a TV screen inside a Mastiff vehicle that the section commander uses to display views from any one of six external cameras, including infra-red capability for night use.
Sgt	Sergeant.
Shell scrape	A shallow earth work, usually dug in haste, which provides a modicum of protection against enemy fire.
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service, also known as MI6, the foreign intelligence gathering arm of the British security services.
SNCO	Senior Non-Commissioned Officer, NCOs (see above) of Sergeant or higher rank.
Sqn	Squadron. A unit within the RAF, normally composed of 12 aircraft. Because the complexity of modern aircraft requires a larger number of personnel to maintain them a modern RAF Sqn is commanded by a Wing Commander, not a Squadron Leader. Also a unit of cavalry equivalent in size to a company of infantry.
SSVC	Services Sound and Vision Corporation. An MoD owned organisation that provides radio, TV and cinema to military personnel serving overseas.
Stag	Slang. Sentry duty.
SSgt	Staff Sergeant – an NCO normally employed on administrative duties within Battalion HQ. Senior to a Sergeant.
Sunray	Radio call-sign used to identify the local commander. Sunray Minor identifies the second in command. These may be used with or without the unit's own call-sign, eg Catfish Sunray or just Sunray.
TA	Territorial Army. Volunteers who serve as soldiers on a part time basis. A number of TA soldiers are on active service in Afghanistan.
Tango	Radio code word for target.
Theatre	The main geographical area where military operations are being carried out, eg Iraq, Afghanistan.
VCP	Vehicle Check Point.
WO	Warrant Officer, also WOI and WOII. The senior most non-commissioned ranks. Although not commissioned

Warrant Officers are addressed as Sir by junior ranks
and may be addressed as Mr by officers.

“I’m lonesome since I crossed the hill
And over the moor that’s sedgy
Such lonely thoughts my heart do fill
Since parting with my Betsey
I seek for one as fair and gay
But find none to remind me
How sweet the hours I passed away
With the girl I left behind me.”

*Anonymous popular song of the American Civil War, based on an older European soldiers’
song, possibly originating in Ireland.*

1. Accident Of War

Death crept into Pakistani airspace at the relatively slow speed of 170 knots. From the ground far below it was invisible to the naked eye. So small was it in comparison to its height that it didn't even cast a shadow on the sides of the mountains.

In the air conditioned control room at Creech Air Force Base, Nevada, Captain Cory Duncan of the United States Air Force checked the position of his aircraft.

“OK guys, we are now in Pakistan air space.” He flicked his radio switch. “Achilles One Zero this is Catcher Five. What is the status of hostile aircraft?”

“Achilles One Zero, we have six PAF aircraft in the air at present. We classify them as two pairs of Chengdu Sevens and one pair of Mirage Threes. All are deployed along the frontiers with Kashmir and India. No hostile aircraft in your sector.” The radar operator of the E3 Sentry aircraft, flying high above the Indian Ocean, signed off with a cheery ““Have a nice day”“.

“OK guys, we have 400 miles to target. No hostiles in the area.” At the current cruising speed of their aircraft it would take more than two hours to reach the target.

The mission specialist sitting at the next console raised his head. “We are under radar surveillance, but no missile signatures at present.”

Their General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper RPV would show up brightly on the Pakistani air defence radar systems, and no doubt half a world away a radar operator was tracking their 170 knot progress across his airspace. It was well within the capability of the Pakistani Air Force to locate and destroy a Reaper, but for reasons best known to themselves they had never tried. They raised merry hell every time a mission such as this was carried out, but never raised a finger to stop them. In the meantime mission Catcher Five flew on towards its target at 50,000 feet.

* * *

In the far off city of Abbottabad in North West Pakistan a man settled himself onto a roof to carry out his part of the Catcher Five mission. He was born in Pakistan and regarded himself as a Pakistani patriot, but his wages had been paid by the United States of America ever since he had returned home from his short trip to that country.

In this town the leader of the Al Qaeda terrorist movement had been tracked down and killed by U.S. Navy Seals. Now it was his mission to bring about the end of another enemy of Uncle Sam and, as far as he was concerned, an enemy of his own country.

From his battered rucksack the man pulled out a metal clad attaché case. Opening it he withdrew a rectangular object from its foam rubber packing. It was painted in a camouflaged pattern and had an aperture at one end housing a lens. He laid it gently on the parapet of the roof and took out the other object in the case, a collapsible tripod. The tripod was screwed into the base of the device, the legs were extended then the whole assembly set down carefully behind the waste high wall that surrounded the roof. On hot nights people slept up here and it wouldn't do for a sleepy child to fall over the edge of the roof.

The man sighted along the device and lined it up carefully on the house that was providing temporary accommodation for the second in command of the Taliban in North West Pakistan.

A check on his watch showed it was still a long time to go before the aircraft would be in range. No point in wasting valuable battery life by switching the device on too early.

* * *

Trying to overcome his boredom Cory remembered back to when he had joined the United States Air Force and had imagined himself screaming across the skies in a jet fighter, dog fighting with whatever enemies Uncle Sam asked him to fight. For a while that is what he had done, flying F17s in Germany and then South Korea, though he had never been engaged in a dog fight. On 20th March 2003, Cory had flown his F17 into Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was disappointed when the Iraqi air force refused to take to the skies to fight him and his comrades.

Now he was posted to 432nd Fighter Wing at Creech, and wore his flight suit only as a way of distinguishing himself from the ground staff at the base. The aircraft he flew was controlled by signals bounced off satellites while he sat at a console in Nevada and the Reaper was high above the mountains and plains of Afghanistan and Pakistan and, more rarely, Iran.

This mission had started out as a routine tasking to detect the incursion of terrorists along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. It was a search and destroy mission, and they were 'weapons free' to engage any hostile targets they encountered. About an hour into the mission they had been re-tasked to this new operation, a missile attack on a house in a city a third of the world away.

"OK, target is confirmed at location." The intelligence analyst announced, looking up from his computer screen.

"What is our target?" Cory asked out of curiosity.

"A house." The analyst replied.

"No shit Sherlock. That's so helpful."

Staff Sgt Willy Westheimer blushed in acknowledgement of his gaff. "Sorry, Sir. It's a senior figure in the Taliban, that's all they've told me."

It was the job of the intelligence analyst, the third member of the Reaper flight team, to confirm the nature of the target before they released any weapons. It was his responsibility to decide if they were the enemy or just a bunch of kids on their way to school. In this case, however, he wouldn't even see the human target, so this time he wouldn't be responsible for identifying him when the time came. That was the responsibility of a man risking his life on the ground in Pakistan.

Time ticked by and the crew chatted to relieve the boredom. An imaginary line in the sky was finally passed and Lieutenant 'Ace' Vincent, the weapons specialist, announced that Catcher Five was within range to begin the attack sequence.

"Taking us down to attack height." Cory pushed forward the joystick mounted on the arm of his leather chair. It was hardly any different from that used to control a games console. In the sky above Pakistan the Reaper's nose dropped and the aircraft began to descend to 20,000 feet.

* * *

On the sweltering roof in Pakistan the man checked his watch again. The mobile phone in his hand vibrated to indicate that a text message had been received. The message contained only one word, the code word for the mission to proceed.

The man flicked a switch on the side of the rectangular object, then sighted along it again. Half a mile away a miniscule green dot appeared on the side wall of a house.

* * *

“We have laser lock.” ‘Ace’ informed the team. Like Duncan he had joined the Air Force to fly in fast jets, but now flew a technology driven operating console instead. Still, it wasn’t too much of a hard life, playing computer games at Uncle Sam’s expense, and just down the road was the city of Las Vegas. For a gambling man like ‘Ace’ that could only be good news. Meanwhile, the Raytheon sensor systems aboard the Reaper had picked up the electromagnetic signature of laser light being reflected from the target, which was all that ‘Ace’ needed to carry the mission through to its conclusion.

* * *

The man turned as he heard voices approaching up the stairs that led to the roof. The house was supposed to be empty, and he had paid hard American dollars for it to be so. The door at the top of the stairs was jammed shut from the outside, a stout chair wedged under the handle, but if someone wanted to gain access to the roof it wouldn’t take much effort. The voices faded and the man relaxed a little. The tiny nudge of his foot against the tripod that held the laser target designator went unnoticed. Over the half mile space between the roof and the target the tiny angle of error was magnified so that it now shone its slender beam not on the original house, but on a very similar one a few metres further along the street.

* * *

“I have visual.” Ace called, informing his pilot that the on-board camera had aligned itself to the source of the laser reflections and was now providing a visual feed to them. The TV screen showed an oblique angle view of a typical concrete and cinder block building arranged in a square around a central courtyard. The same pictures were being viewed in an operations room on the other side of the country, just outside Washington DC. There were no people visible in the house, even when Ace zoomed the camera to get a close up. In the heat of the day all sensible Pakistanis sought the cooler interiors of their homes or workplaces. The lucky ones would have air-conditioning, but a lack of vents on the exterior walls suggested that this house wasn’t that lucky.

“Visual identification confirms target. You are weapons free.” Willy announced as his computer screen displayed a fresh message. “I repeat, you are weapons free.”

Raising the safety guard Ace pressed the weapon release button. “Missile launched.” He stated flatly, as though they were engaged in a practice drill rather than actual warfare.

It took 1.2 seconds for the electronic command to reach the Reaper and release the missile carried on one of its external stores pylons. The AGM-114 Hellfire missile streaked away

under the power of its solid fuel rocket. The aircraft lurched slightly as it reacted to the sudden loss of the 100lb weight.

The missile's electronic brain adjusted the angle of attack as it responded to the laser signal that originated on the ground and the missile powered the final 2 miles to its target. Dropping from 20,000 feet it hardly needed the power of its rocket, which only served to speed its descent. The sonic boom created as it broke the sound barrier wouldn't be heard above the blast of its explosion.

* * *

Youssef left the Madrassa at the end of his school day and headed for his father's house. He felt quite elated; his tutor had just told him that he was making good progress in his studies. It would soon be time for him to start repaying some of the cost of his education by teaching English to the younger students.

It was about a mile from the school to his home and the heat made him uncomfortable. He hadn't yet become acclimatised. When his parents had returned to Pakistan to manage the building they had inherited from Youssef's Grandfather the boy had remained behind in Britain to finish his education. Now that he was here he was finding it difficult to adapt to some features of his new home.

Keeping to the shade the man on the roof went unnoticed by Youssef, as did the laser designator that directed its needle thin beam across the rooftops of the quiet suburb. The sun glinted off the Reaper's wing as it went into a turn to maintain its position, but that too went unnoticed.

* * *

"Target destroyed" announced 'Ace', as the view at the centre of his TV screen disappeared in a bright flash of light. As the burst subsided the TV screen showed a cloud of dust and flying debris. The blast of the metal augmented 18lb explosive charge had left only one wall standing. Along the street debris crashed to the ground, risking the lives of anyone in the open at that moment. In a richer country glass would have shattered, but here there was no need of it and little money to pay for it even if there had been a need.

"Taking us home." Cory announced. By home he meant back into Afghan airspace. Their mission to Pakistan might be complete, but their patrol still had several hours to run. He pulled the joystick backwards and to the right and the aircraft at once climbed and reversed its course. With the Reaper capable of staying aloft for up to 42 hours it wouldn't be them that landed the aircraft back at Bagram Air Base.

* * *

On the roof the man stared aghast as the dust cloud cleared to reveal that the wrong house had been destroyed. His ears were still recovering from the blast of the detonation, so it was some minutes before the noise of panic in the streets reached him. Running men, some of them armed, drew his attention. Rats leaving the sinking ship.

The man returned his gaze to the place where a house had once stood. He hoped that it was unoccupied, but knew in his heart it was unlikely to be so. Women and children had been observed at that house and any hope for them was already lost. He offered up a fervent prayer for their souls, then dismantled his equipment. A few minutes later a text message was on its way to Islamabad, telling of the terrible mistake that had been made.

Turning his back he didn't see the drama unfolding at the stricken house. A young man being physically restrained from throwing himself into the wreckage to search for survivors. It was a sensible precaution as the last remaining wall of the house collapsed inwards into the space the man had been heading for.

* * *

Youssef felt the blast before he heard it, the vibration travelling through the earth in a straight line as the sound bounced and ricocheted off the walls of the buildings to assault his ears a split second later. Smoke and dust rose in a plume. He had been in Abbottabad long enough to have a good sense of the source of the plume. His eyes opened wide in fear and he started to run. The heat of the day no longer mattered as he built up his stride to his full bowling pace and then beyond. He bounced off walls as he refused to slow down to round corners.

As he rounded the final obstacle between himself and his father's house he was left in no doubt. Where there had once been a happy home where he had lived for the past several weeks. Now there was just a heap of rubble, the dust settling back onto it. He howled in anguish at the loss of his family. He continued his headlong run towards the rubble, desperate to start searching for survivors. Surely someone must be alive. There was no time to waste.

Strong hands grabbed at him, the first few slipping off as his weight and speed carried him forward. But they slowed him enough and other hands completed the job, holding him back. He was forced almost to the ground and pinned in place.

"No brother. It isn't safe. You'll get yourself killed." Youssef heard the words but his brain refused to comprehend their meaning.

"My Father. My Mother. The children. I must help them." The men struggled to restrain him.

"No, brother. They are beyond your help now. Let Allah take them."

Youssef collapsed onto his knees, his body wracked with sobs, his laboured breathing combining into wheezing gasps. Satisfied that he wouldn't attempt to approach the wreckage of the house again, the men relaxed their grip. Sirens indicated the approach of rescue vehicles and they moved out of the way, anxious not to become casualties themselves. Youssef reluctantly went with them.

A lone man approached the distraught Youssef and he felt something hard bang into his side. He registered the presence of a weapon. They weren't unusual in this part of Pakistan, but he wasn't used to seeing them in this quiet neighbourhood.

"After you have buried your family, look for me outside the mosque." The man said, then turned and walked away. Youssef saw him climb into the front of a pick-up truck that already held half a dozen other armed passengers in its cargo space. As the rescue vehicles arrived the pick-up drove away at a pace that wouldn't attract attention.

2. Bright Futures

Four Months Earlier

Youssef left the mosque with a broad grin on his face. Huddling into his coat in the sharp March breeze he hurried along Seven Sisters Road towards his home, anxious to share his news with his family. He felt the urge to skip, but resisted it. He was nearly twenty, a man, not some silly boy.

Sun glinted off the rain slicked roof tiles of the terraced houses. Traffic splashed along the road beside him, wetting Youssef's feet as they passed. Already the weather men were forecasting a hose pipe ban and Youssef chuckled at the absurdity of it on such a damp day. Weak sunshine struggled to break through the clouds as the rain slid away northwards.

Arriving at the small house, he let himself in and called out to see who was at home.

"Ssh, Youssef," His aunt scolded, coming down the stairs. "Your nephew is still sleeping."

Youssef's cousin Ata had come late in his aunt's life, much to the joy of the whole family, but his demands placed a great strain on his aunt and her only periods of respite were when the child slept.

"Good news, Auntie, I've been accepted."

"Please, Youssef, you know I prefer Aunt Aaleyah." She spoke with mock severity.

"Sorry, Aunt Aaleyah, but did you hear what I said? The Madrassa has accepted me. A full scholarship."

"Oh my." His aunt ran across the room and took his face in her hands and placed a sloppy kiss on Youssef's forehead. "That's wonderful. Your uncle will be so pleased. Have you told him yet?"

"No, he left the mosque straight after prayers to go back to work. It'll have to wait till this evening."

"Oh, so much to do. Now, go and get all your laundry, I must get it washed." Aunt Aaleyah flapped around the room, going from one corner to the other, not knowing where to start. The kitchen was her pride and joy, her private fiefdom. While her husband's rather traditional tastes dominated the rest of the house, this one room sparkled with stainless steel and the sheen of hardwood veneers. She had designed the whole edifice herself and nearly driven the salesman insane with her changing demands and specifications. She spent little time in the other rooms of the house, except to sleep.

"Easy, Aunt Aaleyah. I've got a couple of weeks before I have to go. There's plenty of time for you to do the laundry."

"My nephew the Imam." Mrs Ibrahim squealed with delight.

"No Aunt Aaleyah, your nephew the scholar. If I do well then perhaps I may be allowed to study to become an Imam. Now, are you sure that father and mother are expecting me?"

"We've already agreed it with them. I knew you would be accepted. It is Allah's will. We spoke to your father last week and they are so excited by the prospect of you going home to live with them. They have a big house, so there is plenty of room."

“I can hardly think of it as my home. I’ve never lived there myself. But I’m so excited Aunt Aaleyah. Going to Pakistan, studying at the Madrassa. It’s going to be so wonderful.” Youssef paced around the room, a dreamy look on his face.

“Remember Youssef, Pakistan is very different from England and Abbottabad isn’t Finsbury. It’s not just the heat, but a whole different culture. You must speak with Mumtaz Faraj. He lived longer in Karachi than he has lived here. He’ll be able to advise you on how to behave. I don’t want you disgracing the family name and nor will your father.” She took her nephew’s face in her hands again. “I’m going to miss you so much.” Her face expressed a mother’s love even though he was a nephew.

“You’ll have the baby to keep you occupied, Aunt Aaleyah. You’ll hardly know I’ve gone. I bet I’ll be hardly through the door before Uncle Rafiq has my room rented out.”

She tapped him playfully on the cheek. “Don’t be rude about your uncle. He works hard and is careful with money. Other families would be happy to be blessed with a man as good as him.”

Youssef accepted the telling off in good heart. “Now, I’m just going to visit Mr Rahman to give him the good news.”

“Are you sure that its Mr Rahman that you’re going to see?” His aunt asked archly. While Mr Rahman was a good family friend she was quite sure that Youssef was far more interested in sharing his news with his daughter, Fatima.

Youssef just smiled and put his coat back on. “I’ll be back in an hour.” He announced, as he left the house.

As the door slammed shut behind her nephew, Mrs Ibrahim sat down at the kitchen table and wept. She was so happy that he had been accepted at the madrassa, but she was also going to miss him so much. She could feel the pain of her loss already, and he hadn’t even gone yet. For almost ten years, since his parents returned to Pakistan, she had nurtured him and cared for him. He had been her whole universe. Now he was going to Pakistan and it might be years before she saw him again. She still had her baby, her own child, but losing her nephew would be like losing her firstborn.

* * *

Youssef was dismayed when Fatima didn’t appear to share his happiness. They sat in the living room of her home, accompanied by an aged aunt who was acting as chaperone.

The aunt appeared to be engrossed in a TV show about antiques, but was keeping a careful eye on her niece at the same time. More importantly she was keeping a careful eye on the boy. She knew about boys and what they got up to when they thought no one was watching. Well, nothing would happen if she had anything to do with it. She looked across at her niece. Such beauty, not even her hijab could hide it. So like herself at that age.

“I’m sorry, Youssef. I know this means so much to you, but what if you forget me? What if you meet someone else?”

“It won’t happen, Fatima.” He longed to take her in his arms, to give her a hug of reassurance, but knew that it would result in him being evicted from the house for his boldness. “Firstly I’m going to be studying at a Madrassa, and there are no girls there. And

you know that in Pakistan the families of girls never let them go out alone, so how can I meet any? Besides, I have no desire to meet anyone else.”

Fatima pouted. “Maybe not now, but when you’ve been away for a few months, who knows how you might feel. Maybe your father will have plans for you.”

“I promise you Fatima, I’m not interested in meeting other girls. The only girl I’m interested in is you. My father knows this and accepts it. I’ll spend all my time studying, and when I get back, perhaps, you know...”

She smiled shyly. “Are you proposing, Youssef?”

“You know that wouldn’t be right. My father has to speak to your father, and that can’t happen until I come back. Actually he will probably ask my Uncle Rafiq to talk to your father. Then, if I can get a job, a position at a mosque, maybe your father will agree.” He paused and spent a long time looking at his finger nails. “But if I were to propose...”

“I would say yes. I wouldn’t even need to think about it.” She looked across at her aunt, hoping that she might have dozed off, but was disappointed to find that she was still engrossed in the TV programme. Fatima was a good girl, but she would have been willing to risk a quick kiss if her aunt wasn’t watching.

“I’m going to miss you so much, it will break my heart when you go.”

“I’ll phone every week. I promise.”

“It isn’t enough.”

“My father has a PC, maybe we could Skype.”

“If I see any Skyping going on there will be trouble.” The aunt said, not understanding what the word meant.

The two youngsters laughed. “Auntie, Skyping is talking to each other using a computer.” The girl explained, thinking ‘Oh for a few minutes of privacy’.

“That better be all it means.” The old woman grumbled, but returned to watching her TV programme.

“It isn’t just that you will be so far away, or that you might meet another girl. You hear such stories about young men going to Pakistan and Bangladesh and then... you know. the next time they’re seen it’s in Syria or Iraq.”

“You have no need to worry about me in that respect. Those people are fools. They believe that killing people will gain them entry to paradise. I don’t believe that. Islam is a peaceful religion and in peaceful religions there is no need of killing. I have studied the Holy Book. It prohibits the killing of Muslims, yet those fools in Syria and Iraq do little else. It can’t be right and I don’t believe it is right.”

“It always amazes me that you want to become an Imam, Youssef. You were such a mischievous little boy. Pulling my hair and getting into trouble all the time.”

“I know, but that was when I was nine or ten. I’ve grown up a lot since then.”

“But an Imam, a holy man. It’s such a big change. Cricketer I could understand. You love cricket.”

“But I love Allah as well. You remember old Mr Chaudhri who used to live three doors down from us?”

“Yes. I remember him. He was such a good man.”

“Exactly. He was a good man. He didn’t just go to the mosque on Friday like a lot of other people. He really tried to live his life by the words of the Prophet, all blessings be upon him.

When he became ill, before he died, I used to take meals round for him that my auntie made. I would sit with him while he ate and talk with him. It was inspiring to listen to him.”

“So he was a good man. I don’t see your point.”

“That’s because I haven’t yet made it. He inspired me to try to live like him, but to do more. If Mr Chaudhri had been an Imam, he could have changed so many lives for the better. He set a good example of course, but he could have taught our people so much about what it really means to be a Muslim.”

“Don’t you think that our Imam does that now?”

“He teaches the word of the Prophet, blessings be upon him, and that is what he is required to do. But I never feel that he really gets the message across about what it means to be a Muslim in today’s world, especially in a country like Britain. He doesn’t condemn the preachers of evil and so they become stronger. He doesn’t explain the Holy Book in the way Mr Chaudhri explained it. The Imam teaches the way he would if we lived in Islamabad.”

“Give me an example.”

“Well, you know that the Prophet advises against the drinking of alcohol. It makes men do stupid things. But in Britain alcohol is freely available. Look at Seven Sisters Road. How many shops are there that sell alcohol, and I don’t mean pubs or restaurants? There must be a dozen or more and that doesn’t even include the big supermarkets. Some of them are even owned by Muslims. So there is temptation at every turn. Can it therefore be a surprise that young Muslim men drink alcohol? Of course not. They are curious, so they try some. Maybe they like it, so they try some more. Then one day they find out what the Prophet really meant, when they drink too much and are ill, or end up in a police cell because they did something stupid while under the influence of alcohol. Maybe they will learn the lesson and maybe they won’t.”

“So what was Mr Chaudhri’s answer? Did he have one?”

“Of course. He said you should take these young men into a room and give them alcohol. Let them have their fill and let them do stupid things. But make sure you capture it on video and play it back to them when they are sober again. Let them see how stupid they have been, but in a controlled way, where they can’t do harm to others.”

“I don’t think the mosque committee would approve of that.”

“Of course they wouldn’t, but that doesn’t make it a bad idea. Sometimes telling people that something is wrong just makes it more attractive. Look at the number of Muslim boys who chase after English girls. We are told to respect women and that sex before marriage is wrong, but that doesn’t stop those boys wanting sex, and if they can’t get it from Muslim girls they will go and get it where they can, just like the alcohol.”

At the mention of sex the aged aunt shuffled in her seat and became more alert, but seeing that the two young people were sitting a decent distance apart she relaxed a little and returned to watching her TV programme, though she did take care to increase her watch over them.

“So are you suggesting that you also put boys in a room with girls and let them see what happens?” Fatima shot a glance across to her auntie, fearing she might react to what she had said, but the auntie was engrossed in her TV programme.

Youssef went red, realising that he had been caught out by the logic of his own argument. “Perhaps there are things that will work in some circumstances and not others. But you see what I mean. Show people rather than tell them.”

“But they can see what happens when people drink alcohol. They can see it any Friday or Saturday night outside the pubs and nightclubs.”

“And Mr Chaudhri had an explanation for that as well. It’s like drug users. Drug users say that they can control their habit, even when it is clear that the habit controls them. It’s the same with alcohol. The young men who drink think that they are in control when they aren’t. You must show people that they can’t control themselves when they are drunk. It’s almost the definition of being drunk.

The people that are seen outside of the pubs and nightclubs are unbelievers. No Muslim would dare allow himself to be seen that way for fear of what his family would say. But it doesn’t stop young Muslim men from drinking and it doesn’t stop them doing stupid things. Anyway, it’s only a theory. Maybe it wouldn’t work, but it was a practical proposal. Just telling people not to do something doesn’t seem to work by itself.”

“So that’s what makes you want to become an Imam.”

“I think so. Yes, trying to find new ways of dealing with old problems, but at the same time keeping Allah at the centre of our lives, where he should be. I’m not saying that Mr Chaudhri was right in all things, but at least he was thinking about the issues, not just reciting prayers.”

“Well, I think I understand now, at least a little better. It is hard to live in a modern world. I should know. Look at the rows I have had with my father about going to college.”

“Exactly. We forget that this is a modern country which grew without the benefit of Islam to guide it. If we want to fit into it and also retain our faith we have to view things differently. Just before I came over here my auntie reminded me that there are cultural differences that we have to deal with. It doesn’t mean that we have to abandon our faith, but we do have to consider how our children view the world which we expect them to live in.”

“We don’t have any children. Not yet.”

“But that doesn’t mean that we won’t have any, does it?”

The elderly auntie’s antenna twitched at the talk of children. “I think Youssef has been here long enough.” She announced. “Perhaps it is time for you to let him return to his family now.”

* * *

In a side street not far away from where Youssef sat with Fatima and her aunt, ‘Lofty’ Lofthouse was getting out of his car. He hauled his rucksack off of the back seat and walked the few paces to the front door of a house. It wasn’t his house, but he did have a front door key which he used to let himself in. It had an empty feel about it, as though it had been waiting for someone to arrive. Emma was at work at that time of day, so Lofty would be on his own until she came home.

Emma had been lucky to have a place like this to herself. With London property prices the way they were, and rents so high, few single women could afford such luxury. Most women of her age either lived at home or shared with others. It was the joint benefit of an inheritance and indulgent parents. They had inherited it and Emma had nagged them into letting her rent the house at well below the market rate. Her sister was furious at not having thought of it herself.

He dropped his rucksack onto the floor of the hall and headed towards the kitchen. Hunger nagged at him after the long drive from Wiltshire. Searching the fridge he found the makings of a sandwich. Bread, ham and cheese were quickly assembled, accompanied by a large mug of tea.

Emma would be surprised at his early arrival. Pleasantly surprised, Lofty hoped. Normally the weekend didn't start until the late afternoon, depending on exactly what time the Battalion stood down, but this weekend they were dismissed immediately after the morning parade. Apparently they were in for a busy time, starting from Monday, so the CO wanted everyone to have one last full weekend break before the pressure was applied.

Lofty made himself comfortable in the familiar living room. The room reflected Emma's tastes perfectly. The furniture was inexpensive but comfortable and the walls were decorated with framed photographs of her family interspersed with modern prints and black and white images of street scenes. The room was uncluttered by ornaments or bric-a-brac, though she had allowed some carefully selected books to decorate the large coffee table. Books were as much a part of Emma as her hair style. The room was spotlessly clean, as though dust never dared to show itself.

One day they would buy a house together and would furnish it in a way that suited them both. That was what marriage was all about. But this had been Emma's house before he had even met her, so he didn't want to make his mark on the place.

Lofty was dozing on the settee, the TV showing a programme on house hunting, when he was roused by the sound of the front door opening.

Emma spied the rucksack lying in the hall and went straight into the living room. "Lofty darling," she cried out, rushing to give him a hug. "What a lovely surprise. I wasn't expecting you till this evening." She was as neat and tidy as her home, from her carefully shaped auburn hair to the patent leather flat heeled shoes that she wore.

Lofty gave her a lingering kiss before explaining. "We were stood down early. Apparently we're going to be working hard for the next few months, so they stood us down this morning. Now, how are you?"

"Missing you madly, lover. Come on, let me show you how much." She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the doorway. Lofty didn't resist as she led him up the stairs. Downstairs was off limits for what Emma intended.

* * *

"Is it significant, letting you go early for the weekend?" Emma was curled up in Lofty's arms, snuggled up beneath the sheets.

"I can only think of one reason. It's no secret that we're due for a tour, so I'm guessing they're going to announce it on Monday, then we'll start the training programme."

"Afghanistan?" She whispered the word, almost frightened to say it more loudly in case it brought bad luck.

"Where else? It's a six month tour, so if we start training now we'll be ready to go at the end of September. That includes embarkation leave as well, of course. Roulement months are April and October."

"You'll definitely be going with them, the Battalion I mean?"

“Of course. I’m a Platoon Sergeant. Where my platoon goes I go.”

“And you’ll be away six months. What will I do without you?”

“Get through a lot of batteries I expect.”

Emma slapped his arm, then pulled it closer around herself. “Cheeky. I don’t have anything like that.”

“I’ll buy you one as a going away present.”

“No you won’t” The hard edge to her voice told Lofty she wasn’t joking. He grinned behind her head. He’d do it just for a laugh. Maybe post it to her the day he flew out. And a big box of batteries to go with it.

Emma drifted into thought as Lofty dozed off. She had known Lofty was a soldier when she had met him, but as she got to know him better she started to think of the army as a competitor for her man’s affections.

At first she had thought things might change when they were married, that she would learn to love the army just as he did, but she couldn’t quite get the hang of it. He enjoyed being a soldier so much that she felt excluded. He had asked her to move down to Wiltshire to be closer to him, but she hadn’t fancied the idea. Maybe that had been a mistake.

During the few weekends she had spent down there with him, attending Sergeants’ Mess functions and sports events, she found she had little in common with his friends or their wives. They were so wrapped up in the army life that it was all they seemed to talk about. And the jargon! She thought they were talking a foreign language half the time. Like just now; what the hell did roulement mean? Perhaps you had to live in a garrison, surrounded by other soldier’s wives, in order to understand how it all worked. The idea still didn’t appeal. Down there she wouldn’t be Emma Lofthouse, she knew. She would be Emma, wife of Sgt Lofthouse. That was how every woman she had met had been introduced: “wife of”.

Then there was the politics. Everyone had a rank, and the wives and girlfriends seemed to take on the rank of their men. Emma recalled a conversation she’d had in the Sergeants Mess one night and the embarrassment it had caused. She had been introduced to the wife of the Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) and they had been chatting when one of the other wives had come up and mentioned an excursion that was planned for the next day. Emma had said that it sounded interesting and that she would love to go along as well. She had been rewarded with a cold look and a flat statement that it was only the Warrant Officers’ wives who were going, before the woman turned and walked away. The RSM’s wife had tried to smooth things over but Emma knew she had committed a serious social gaff.

Emma briefly considered putting her foot down and asking Lofty to come out of the army and get a proper job. One where they could live in London and he would come home at nights and not just at weekends. One where she wouldn’t have to wait six months for him, dreading the phone ringing in case it was bad news, but also dreading it not ringing in case he had grown tired of her. She dismissed the idea. Lofty loved the army and she loved Lofty. It wasn’t his fault that she didn’t seem to fit the mould of a military Stepford wife.

But there had to be something she could do, or she was faced with a life of loneliness with him down in Wiltshire, or Afghanistan, while she stayed up here in Finsbury Park. That wouldn’t work either. Friday night was curry night, so they would talk about it at the restaurant, over dinner.

Maybe she should have a chat with her Mum. Mum always seemed to know what to do. When she had cried over her first boyfriend, it had been Mum that had helped her to heap up the photos of him and set fire to them in the BBQ, laughing about how he would regret dumping her one day. When she had been trying to decide what to study at college it had been Mum who had encouraged her to follow her heart, not her head. There was no point in studying a subject that you have no feeling for, she had said, and she had been right. Unlike some of her friends she hadn't had to struggle to maintain an interest in her studies.

Mum liked Lofty. That was a good thing. She would have the best advice to offer on the subject.

* * *

Lofty could feel the tension between them. It had started as soon as they got out of bed to get ready for their regular visit to the Indian restaurant, and had grown ever since.

He could understand it, to a point. He was going to be up to his ears in work for the next few months and then would be half way round the world for another 6 months, their only contact being by e-mail and the odd telephone call. Emma would worry about him, she was bound to. He wondered what he could do to make things easier for her.

Lofty glanced across the table at his wife, nibbling unenthusiastically at a poppadum, and realised how much he loved her. All week long, back at the barracks, he longed for the weekend so that he could be with her again. Drinking in the Sergeants Mess or down at the pub with blokes from the Platoon just weren't what he wanted any more. He wanted to be with Emma. Sundays were torture. The whole day marred by the prospect of having to leave in the evening to return to his solitary room in the Sergeant's Mess.

They had met when he'd gone to see an old school friend. The plan had been to go out for a drink with him, but he'd already made arrangements to meet his girlfriend. A phone call later and the girlfriend had set up a blind date, with her old school friend Emma as the other party.

Lofty and Emma had both been nervous, but Lofty told a silly story about an incident at school and that had broken the ice. By the end of the evening Lofty knew that he had to see Emma again. He stood on the steps of the pub and nervously asked her out. She agreed and a date was set for the following weekend, this time just the two of them. They had eaten in that same Indian restaurant and had done so ever since, almost every Friday night for three years. Six months before, they had got married, with Lofty in his best dress uniform and Emma looking like she had stepped out of the pages of a bridal magazine.

"You look a bit distracted, Emms. Something I should know?"

"I'm sorry Lofty. I'm afraid that your news about Afghanistan has knocked me sideways a bit."

"I thought it might, but you knew it had to come sometime."

"But that was a bit like saying it's tomorrow, and knowing that tomorrow never comes. Now it has though, hasn't it?"

"It goes with the territory. You know that."

“Your territory Lofty, not mine, at least not until now. And it’s not just Afghanistan. That’s bad enough. But when you come back you’ll still be in Wiltshire and I’ll still be here.” She waved her hand to take in the neighbourhood along with the restaurant.

“We’ve talked about this before. You could move down there. We’re entitled to a married quarter and I reckon you could get a job on the garrison, or maybe in Trowbridge. But you said you didn’t want that.”

“Well maybe it’s time to think about it again. How long have you got left on your current engagement?”

“Three years. I can give a years’ notice to leave, but it wouldn’t make any difference. Once we’re put on warning for Afghanistan we can’t leave until we come back. It would be bad for morale otherwise.”

“Have you thought about leaving?”

“To tell you the truth, no I haven’t. You know how I feel about the army. It’s my life.”

“You’ve told me that enough times, but I’ve never really understood why. It’s just a job, after all.”

“Not to me. To me it’s a way of making a difference.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, my Dad died doing it. I’ve told you how he died in Northern Ireland. Well, the army were there to keep the Nationalists and the Loyalists apart. To stop them killing each other.”

“They killed your father.”

“I know. But he died doing what he believed in. Now it’s my turn. This isn’t just a job to me, it’s a way of making a difference. Look at what we did in Bosnia and Kosovo. We saved hundreds of thousands of lives just by being there.”

“And Iraq?”

“Well, maybe we shouldn’t have got involved in that one, but I think we made a difference there as well. Saddam Hussein killed anyone who opposed him.”

“And hundreds of thousands died in the war and afterwards.”

“True. I can’t argue against that, but it wasn’t because of the military. We did what we were told to by the politicians, as always. It was them that got it wrong.”

“And Afghanistan. What are we doing there?”

“Well, first of all we’re stopping it from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. That was where Osama Bin Laden had his base, remember. Secondly we’re stopping the Taliban from taking over the country and making people’s lives a misery.”

“But it’s not our country. It’s not for us to say who should govern it.”

“No it isn’t. But the Afghans should be able to decide that for themselves, but they can’t if the Taliban are running the show. They’ve never stood for election, and they never will, because they know they wouldn’t win. So they’re trying to take power regardless of the what the people want. It’s our job, my job, to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Well, it’s hard to argue against that. You sound very sure about it all.”

“If I didn’t believe what we were doing was right, I couldn’t stay in the army.”

“Well, I can appreciate that. So where does that leave us? When you come back you’ll still be in Wiltshire and I’ll still be in London.”

“We could get a married quarter within weeks. You can move down and there will be plenty of time for you to settle in, make friends, before I have to go. Maybe you’ll feel less lonely if you’re surrounded by other people in the same boat.”

Emma considered his answer as she toyed with her starter, pushing a slice of cucumber round her plate. She didn’t have much of an appetite.

“I’m a London girl, a city girl.” She said at last. “What would I do in the middle of the country?”

“I was a London boy before I joined up. Half the wives are from this part of the world. I wouldn’t be surprised if you went to school with some of them. They seem to fit in alright. It’s a Garrison, not Emmerdale Farm. It’s got its own shops, its own cinema. A big gym, a swimming pool, and all within walking distance. If you want somewhere bigger with more shops then you get in the car and go to Bath.”

“I went to Bath once. It’s nice.”

“There you go. So it’s not all bad, is it?”

“I’m not sure about a married quarter though. It sounds a bit institutionalised.”

“OK, we could rent somewhere, or even buy a place of our own. Close enough for me to get to work, but somewhere you’d feel more at home. There’s some nice towns in that part of the world. You’ve seen it. It’s very pretty.”

“You’d be happy to buy a house?”

“It would make more sense than renting a place. I’ve got enough savings for a deposit and to buy furniture. There’s some real bargains to be had right now. It would mean you could get more involved in the social life, the Sergeants Mess. Meet some new people and make new friends.”

“What about work?”

“They have librarians in Wiltshire as well, you know, and in Somerset. Besides, with your qualifications you could walk into a job just about anywhere. You never know, there might even be something on the Garrison.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll meet you half way. I’ll look for a job, and if I can get one then I’ll move down there. We’ll give it a try.” There was no way, Emma felt, that she could contemplate moving without being sure of employment. It wasn’t the money, but it was the independence that a wage gave her. She wasn’t going to be anyone’s ‘wife of’.

Lofty stretched his hand across the table and placed it over one of Emma’s. “I love you Babe. We’ll make this work, I promise you.”

“It better had Lofty. My sister will be waiting on the doorstep for me to move out, so there’ll be no coming back here.”

With the short term future decided Emma’s appetite returned and she started a methodical demolition of her chicken chat.

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