

# **A SECOND CHANCE**

by

**Richard Boston**

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Sample Chapters

[rjboston@fsmail.net](mailto:rjboston@fsmail.net)

He staggered again, almost losing his footing. His breath was coming in short gasps now. The light had almost gone and the fire in his lungs howled at him to stop. He had no idea how long he'd been running. It didn't matter. To him, time was as meaningless as the shouting that had trailed him since he'd made his escape.

He dragged himself through yet another hedge into a small country lane. If anyone had seen him emerge, they might have thought him a criminal, fleeing his jailers or the local police. Had they taken a closer look, they would have seen his nakedness and the feral glaze to his eyes. They might have assumed he was a dangerous lunatic, escaped from some nearby asylum.

But he knew nothing of these things, or at least had no memory of them. He knew nothing of suburbs or mental hospitals. He had as little concept of crime as he did of law enforcement. The dogs that sniffed his scent were as much a mystery to him as the sun had been when he'd first snatched the gift of consciousness and made his escape.

As he followed the warm tarmac downhill, past the garden gates of old stone houses, he called up his first, vague memory. Glass, broken glass - the image was clear, but it still meant nothing to him. The tiny shards were still buried beneath his skin, a gritty nagging pain behind the burning in his legs and chest.

He'd been surrounded by the white-coats. Murmuring and gibbering, they'd dragged him onto a rickety trolley. Bright lights and harsh tones, and they'd strapped him down. Then they'd rushed him through the corridors. White lights swung in lop-sided arcs above him. His eyes were open, but his vision was blurred and confusing.

The straps were loose and it took only a few concerted tugs to free himself. No one noticed until he sat bolt upright and swung his legs over the edge. Then they leaped away from him, pressed their white-coat backs against the pure white walls of the corridor. The muttering stopped and the moment was frozen in silence.

He sprang from the trolley and collapsed to the floor, the doors swinging open as he fell against them. Still nobody moved. They just stared at him, their twisted faces strange and meaningless. He dragged himself to his feet, his legs wobbling beneath him. Within moments he was staggering through the doors, then running, his focus on moving forward and not falling flat on his face.

He'd just caught sight of the sun's blinding light when the air filled with a piercing scream, over and over, a disorienting high-pitched wail. For all his confusion, he'd known it was screaming at him. He'd looked into the sun, then, seen it for what it was - the opposite of the darkness he sought to escape. He had run towards it, past the hulking shouters with their heavy sticks, and out into its rapturous warmth. He had followed it all afternoon, his fear intensifying as the sun turned to orange and sank

towards the horizon. It was leaving him, abandoning him to his pursuers and their smothering dungeon, deep underground.

Now, as he cut across a stretch of short, soft grass, the sun's dulling afterlight finally disappeared. All that remained to shield him from the all-consuming darkness were the small, orange lights overhead.

A sudden throbbing in the air warned him of danger. He dropped to his haunches on the grass. He looked around him, anxious for the source of the sound. The barking and shouting had long since faded and ceased, but this thud-thud-thudding was all the more ominous.

And then it was over him, a deafening thrashing sound and a spiralling wind that lashed at his naked flesh. A dazzling brightness lanced at his eyes and he raised his arms to fend off this torturous mockery of the sun.

The thing came lower and closer. The wind grew stronger, battering his huddled body as he crouched on the incriminating disc of bright white grass. And all around him, beyond the traitorous light, lay the darkness and its cynical promise of safety.

Thomas woke suddenly, startled from a deep sleep by the noise downstairs. Some enormous threshing machine was thud-thud-thudding at the thick night air. He slid out from beneath the thin summer duvet and fumbled his way across the bedroom. Finding the door, he snatched his dressing gown from the back of it, pulled it over him and slipped out onto the landing. The noise was louder now and the floor was throbbing at his feet.

He made his way to the top of the stairs but was still unable to determine the source of the noise. Hesitantly, he edged his way down, his back against the wall, his eyes slowly growing accustomed to the darkness.

By the time he reached the bottom, the sound had risen to a deafening roar. To his right, the kitchen door was vibrating. When he touched the handle, he felt the noise course through his arm, into his chest and heart. With a jolt and a great rush of air, the door snapped open and he was dragged stumbling into the kitchen. His dressing gown spiralled around him, caught in the strong circular wind from the huge ceiling fan that threshed the hot summer air. He fell to his knees, hands over his ears, hoping in vain to block out the sound.

Then, suddenly, it stopped. The air was still, the room silent. He lowered his hands and looked around him. Facing him across the large round kitchen table was a dead man, his body sagging in the antique wooden chair, his head lolled back and his mouth open. Thomas took a step towards him, his bare feet sticky on the linoleum floor. Behind the corpse, a dazzling white light flared, a searchlight beyond the kitchen window. Thomas shielded his eyes as he continued toward the dead man's silhouette.

The second he reached the table, the man's head rolled forward. The gaping mouth closed and the eyes came to life, but the deathly pallor remained. The searchlight left them. The man smiled thinly, extending his hand across the empty space between them. Thomas stared at him suspiciously for a moment before taking the hand in his own. The dead man shook it and his smile broadened.

The man's head snapped violently to his left. Thomas followed his gaze to find himself in the front seat of his car. Blinded by a pair of huge round headlights, he grabbed at the wheel and span it to the left. The truck's horn sounded. Too late, too late.

Thomas was torn from his dream by a noise outside, a dull thud-thud-thudding in the distance. Christ, it was hot. He pushed off the duvet and padded across the carpet to the window, using the back of his wrist to wipe the sweat from his forehead. The dreams were getting worse. It would be the weather.

He'd always hated the heat, or rather the humidity. For some unknown reason it gave him the most terrible nightmares.

He pulled the curtain aside and peered out into the moonlit night. Above his little piece of Home Counties suburbia, he could see the distant lights of a helicopter, the source of the noise that had both inspired and snatched him from his dream. A circle of bright light danced across the surrounding houses and gardens. A searchlight.

He looked down on his own garden and the tent in which his two young daughters had insisted on spending the night. Had the noise woken them, too? He imagined Ellie's earlier enthusiasm succumbing to fear as the powerful searchlight pierced the thin material of the tent. Kate would be cuddling up to her, comforting her younger sister while trying to quiet her own curious excitement.

But perhaps Kate, too, should have been terrified. The helicopter had to be looking for something. Maybe Alice had been right to worry about the kids being outside overnight. Sure, theirs was a pretty quiet and uneventful neighbourhood, but they weren't all that far from the horrors of London and Thomas' own judgement was based on his experience of the area as a kid. The village itself might have looked much the same, but a lot could change in twenty five years.

And then he saw it, a dark figure dragging itself over the top of the wooden fence to his left. The shadow dropped into the flowerbeds and crouched for a moment, surveying Thomas' garden. Thomas stood transfixed as he pictured the fugitive clambering into the kids' delicate tent. But the intruder ignored it and headed instead for the shed on the opposite side of the garden. He tugged at the door, hauled it open and disappeared inside.

Thomas grabbed his dressing gown and ran downstairs, not stopping to wake his wife. He sprinted into the kitchen, dizzy from the sudden exertion, then grabbed the phone off the wall and dialled 999. While he waited for an answer, he pulled a large knife from the block.

"What service, please?"

"Police," he said, his eyes on the shed. "Look, there's a police helicopter in my area and I reckon they're looking for the person in my back garden."

"And where exactly are you, sir?"

Thomas gave the woman his address.

"I'm afraid I've no record of any police helicopters anywhere near you, sir, but I'll have a car sent round to you straight away. Just stay inside and make sure the doors and windows are secure..."

"And how long will it take them to get here?"

"Five or ten minutes, sir. No more than that."

He hung up the phone and grabbed a broom from one of the kitchen cupboards. With his foot on the brush end, he twisted the handle free. 'Five or ten minutes', when his kids were out in the garden at the mercy of some nutcase? No chance. He slipped the knife into the deep pocket of his dressing gown, then hefted the broom handle for weight as he moved to the back door. He slid the bolts quietly across, then fished the key from under the washing machine and slid it softly into the lock. Seconds later, he was walking across the grass.

He crouched down next to the front flap of the tent and whispered the girls' names.

"Dad, is that you?"

"Yes, Kate, it's me. Are you and Ellie okay in there?"

There was a pause before his older daughter replied. "I'm okay. Ellie's a bit scared, but I've told her it's only a helicopter. What's going on, Dad?"

"I need the two of you to go back inside, that's all. I want you to come out quietly and go back into the house. Wake your mother up and tell her to look out of the window. Then you and Ellie hop into our bed and try and get back to sleep."

Kate unzipped the front flap and scrambled out onto the grass. Ellie followed close behind, smiling nervously at her father.

"Daddy, what's that stick for?" the younger girl asked him, suspiciously.

"It's to hold the shed door closed," he told her. "I heard the door banging earlier and I'm just going to prop the stick against it until I can fix it in the morning."

"I didn't hear it," Ellie replied, screwing her nose up. "All I heard was the helicopter."

"That's because your ears are smaller than mine - *and* you were supposed to be asleep, although I'm sure the two of you have been nattering all through the night, as usual."

Ellie looked guiltily at her older sister. Kate grinned. Thomas smiled and kissed them both on the forehead before urging them inside. He waited for them to pass through the kitchen door before he rose to his feet and padded towards the shed. His grip was tight around the broom handle and he could feel the weight of the knife as it swung against his thigh. What was he doing? Why didn't he go back inside, hole up with his wife and kids and wait for the police to arrive?

Because that was the sensible thing to do, because he'd become obsessed with his own mortality. As a child and throughout his twenties, he'd been reckless. When Kate had first been born, his faith in his own vitality had remained unshaken. He may have been a father, but he was still a young man. He continued to play rugby for the local team and his bruises were quick to heal. Not once was he on the receiving end of a serious injury.

But now he was different. At thirty seven, he was horribly aware of both his frailties and his responsibilities. He'd given up rugby, rarely played squash and had quit smoking. He'd grown painfully sensible, thirty seven pushing fifty. When one of the girls fell and hurt themselves, he struggled to remain calm. Ellie had suffered most from this. Kate was blessed with the excited confidence that had once been his, but Ellie was nervous. He only hoped she soaked up some of her mother's strength as she got older.

And that's what all this was about. Alice would have kept them all inside. She would have taken control, locked up the house and perhaps even whisked them out of the front door and into the car. She'd have run the show and they'd all have been safe - not that she was a coward. Far from it, Alice was one of the bravest women he knew. But her risks were well calculated, and - she would have insisted - they had nothing to gain from confronting a potentially dangerous fugitive.

Which was exactly why Thomas was here. He needed to prove he was capable of defending his family - to himself as much as to her. She'd married a fiery young man, twenty five years old and as untouched by fear as any practising Catholic could be. He'd been a lawyer then, brutally talented at work, skilled and powerful on the rugby field, and equally as passionate in and out of the bedroom. Twelve years later, she was left with a politically correct has-been who'd shed religion, renounced the legal profession, and exchanged sport for healthy eating. And the passion? While he'd become a man brimming with worthy causes, and free from the yoke of Catholicism, their once frantic sex life had long since withered. What little excitement was left they owed to the occasional drunken scuffle or their own private fantasies.

Thomas stared at the shed door. This was his last chance to turn back. A rivulet of sweat ran down his back, soaking into his dressing gown wherever it met his skin. He could hear the helicopter in the distance, coming slowly closer. Steadying the broom handle in his right hand, he reached out and grasped the latch. With a deep breath, he raised it slowly then yanked the door open.

The shed was large and cluttered and it took him a few seconds to find what he was looking for. Huddled in the far corner, partially covered by a paint-spattered dust sheet, was a broad shouldered man with short blonde hair. His soft blue eyes were filled with terror and, as far as Thomas could make out, he was entirely naked. This was hardly the confrontation he'd expected.

"What are you doing in here?" Thomas demanded.

Startled by his question, the intruder shrank further behind the dust sheet.

Thomas frowned. "I'm not going to hurt you," he told him, standing the broom handle against the doorframe. Purely as a precaution, he slipped his hand into the pocket of his dressing gown, his fingers resting delicately on the handle of the knife. "I was just wondering what's going on, that's all."

The man's jaw was shaking, but still he said nothing. A mental patient? Perhaps, but there was no hospital tag on either of his wrists. Still, he could have torn or cut it off.

"Thomas, what's going on?" Alice called from just outside the back door. He looked over his shoulder to see her standing in the garden in her dressing gown. At her side were two uniformed police officers.

"Please move away from the shed, sir," the older of the two policemen requested.

Thomas looked back at the fugitive, crouched beneath the dust sheet, shaking with fear. So, this was it. This was his attempt to recover some of the cocky bravery that had earned him Alice's love and respect all those years ago - the gentle giant, armed with a broom handle and knife, stalking a naked idiot in the back garden. And now even this had been taken from him by the ever-helpful boys in blue.

"Sir, the man you reported seeing is wanted by the Army," the policeman explained. "It's their helicopter that's been buzzing around for last couple of hours. They've got a truck on the way to pick him up. Been after him all day, apparently. He's gone AWOL - that's 'absent without leave' to us civilians. They reckon he's dangerous, too. Had some sort of a breakdown. Now, if you'd like to move over here with us..."

AWOL he might have been, but dangerous? The man was terrified and powerless – more like an animal or a shell-shocked amnesic than someone suffering a mental breakdown.

"I'm afraid I haven't a clue what's happened to him," he called out to the policeman, lying uncomfortably. "I thought maybe he'd gone in here, but - as far as I can see - it's empty. He must have jumped the fence while I was on the phone or getting the girls out of the tent."

"All the same, sir, we'd like to check the place over, just to be sure. At times like this, it pays to be extra careful."

So much for heroism. The Police might have welcomed Thomas' attempts at diagnosis, but the military would politely and firmly refuse. He would never know what all this was about. Still, maybe it was for the best.

The helicopter was closer now, and lower. Thomas' dressing gown was caught in the wind from the rotor blades as it came directly overhead. He was reminded of his dream and shuddered. Then he moved away, walking across the garden towards his wife as the two police officers strode past him, truncheons in hand.

To Thomas' astonishment, the two policemen emerged from the shed empty handed. For several minutes, they searched the remainder of the garden. They shone their torches into the girls' tent and the various bushes and trees, but to no avail. Finally, the man who'd spoken previously signalled to the

helicopter pilot and the chopper slowly rose and headed off. Its searchlight flicked back on and rolled across the surrounding gardens.

“Well, looks like he cleared off pretty sharpish,” said the older of the two policemen as he crossed the grass towards them, tucking his truncheon into his belt.

Thomas shrugged, wondering how they could have missed him.

“We’ll leave you to it, sir. I shouldn’t think he’ll be coming through here again, but just make sure all your windows and doors are locked.” He drew a business card from his pocket and scribbled a mobile phone number on the back. “If you see him again before the morning, give me a call on this number. After that, call the station direct and they’ll have a car out in no time. Now I’ve no wish to alarm either of you, but we’ve been advised to warn you against trying to approach him - he’s meant to be highly dangerous. Anyway, thanks for your help, sir, Madam. Hopefully, the Army will have picked him up by the end of the night. I understand they’ve a full search party out already. We’ll let you know if there are any developments.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Alice smiled, holding back a yawn.

“Not at all, Madam. I only wish we’d got here sooner. Anyway, we’ll be off. You get yourselves and the kids to bed.”

The two officers traipsed back through the house and Alice saw them out of the front door. As soon as they were gone, she turned and fixed a stare on her husband.

“That is the first and last time the girls are sleeping outside,” she whispered angrily. “Can you imagine what could have happened to them? And there was you, harping on about what a safe neighbourhood we lived in. Well, it’s not safe enough, Thomas. Heaven knows what that man’s capable of - a trained killer on the loose in our village. And not only is he a trained killer, but he’s apparently lost the plot. They might have wound up dead - or worse.”

The words hung between them like the threat they were. Thomas hadn’t the slightest idea how to respond. She was right, of course. She’d been right all along, from the moment she’d raised an eyebrow when the girls had first asked if they could spend the night in that damned tent. He’d been wrong to laugh off her quiet protestations when he’d surrendered to their sulky persistence. Ironic, that he should so readily place his kids in danger when he was too afraid to take any risks of his own.

“I’m sorry, Alice, I was wrong.”

“Too bloody right you were,” she snapped.

He closed his eyes and let out a deep, silent breath. “You put the kids to bed, I’ll sort the shed out and bring in the broom handle.”

“Is that what it was? You went out into the garden in the middle of the night to beat off a highly trained and unstable soldier with a broom handle? What the hell is wrong with you? Why couldn’t you have just got the kids inside and waited for the police?”

What could he say? Would mentioning the knife in his pocket have made the blindest bit of difference? Was it even worth bothering to explain? No. He saved his energy and responded with a deferent shrug. She rolled her eyes and pushed past him to the stairs.

He stood there for a moment, contemplating their relationship and the events of the past half hour. It never used to be like this. It used to be fun. When they’d first got married they’d been the perfect compliment to each other. He played the reckless idiot and she his sensible counterpart, the taming influence - far from dull, but rarely instinctive or spontaneous. They brought out the best in each other, tempered each other’s extremes. Those days were gone now. They were far more similar and the balance was lost. With it had gone the air of understanding and acceptance. Arguments were no longer resolved with the simple combination of a smile, an apology and a heartfelt hug. These days, the mood lingered. Fiery tempers turned cold; angry outbursts became short functional conversation and long silences, and their eyes wouldn’t meet for hours.

The smoothness of the blade on his fingertips brought him back to his senses. He turned and looked back down the hall, through the kitchen window, at the shed. There was nowhere else the runaway could have gone. He had to still be in there.

He walked back through the kitchen into the garden, his fingers playing nervously with the knife handle as he went. Perhaps he’d been wrong about him. Perhaps he was as dangerous as the police sergeant had said. But there hadn’t been the slightest hint of it in the man’s eyes – only fear and confusion. It must be some form of amnesia, he thought – possibly caused by a fall during his escape. Still, that didn’t explain why the man was naked.

Thomas reached the shed to find the broom handle propped up where he’d left it. The door stood open before him.

As far as he could ascertain, the shed was empty. The man had simply vanished. Three paint-spattered dust sheets lay on the floor where the police had left them, and there was nowhere else to hide. Thomas shone his torch around the worktops and the old chests of drawers, between the sun loungers and deck chairs that stood, folded, against the far end of the shed. Ridiculous. Where the hell had he gone?

Suddenly, he heard a noise behind him, a soft pattering as though there was water leaking through the roof of the shed. He froze, glancing out of the window through the corner of his eye. There was no

sign of rain. He remembered the broom handle and wished he'd picked it up, rather than leaving it to be used against him. But there were other, more dangerous things to hand out here: shears, secateurs and Christ knew what else. He slid his hand slowly into his pocket as the pattering continued. The police sergeant's warning echoed in his mind. Even if he were amnesic, the man could be dangerous. All the more so, in fact - fear and disorientation might cause him to panic. Thomas shouldn't have come in here alone. He might as well have chased a wounded bear into its den.

He took a few cautious steps forward, moving deeper into the shed, further from the door, to allow the frightened man his opportunity to escape. The noise came to an end as Thomas halted before the folded deck chairs, but there was no movement. Where was he? Without moving his head, he looked upward at the roof. Christ! So much for an exhaustive search by the dedicated local police. Their fugitive had obviously been hiding in plain view, just above their heads.

Thomas stood for almost a minute with his back to his potential attacker before the silence got the better of him. He turned slowly, his hand tight around the handle of the knife he'd stashed in his dressing gown pocket. Above him in the flimsy rafters, crouched the shaking fugitive, his bulk threatening to collapse the shed on top of them. A puddle spread across the floor below - urine, by the smell of it. In his eyes was the same look of terror Thomas had seen earlier. An attack, even from behind, couldn't have been more unlikely.

Thomas took a few tentative steps towards him. The man flinched with every movement but stayed where he was.

"It's okay," Thomas said softly, his voice deep and comforting. "I'm not going to hurt you - and I'm not going to report you, either. You can stay here as long as you like, but if you stay up there you might bring the whole shed down."

The man stared back at him blankly. *Why am I doing this? Thomas thought to himself. Because it's my job? Because I've been lost, too? Or because I'm hoping it'll tear me back from the edge of a mid-life crisis?*

"I want to help you," he tried again, his hands before him in clichéd supplication. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The man cocked his head, staring down at him like a confused dog at its owner. Thomas sighed quietly and rubbed the light stubble on his chin. More than amnesia, then - or not amnesia at all. Aphasia, perhaps - a head injury could easily have impaired his ability to speak or understand others. No, it was too complete for that. He should, at the very least, be gibbering incomprehensibly.

Of course...

A deaf mute. Thomas had been blinkered by his own expertise.

There was one sure-fire way to find out. Thomas moved one hand slowly behind his back, then clicked his fingers loudly. The man flinched, squinting curiously down at him, craning his neck in an attempt to peer over Thomas' shoulder.

Okay, not deaf then. Just mute? Retarded?

One thing was for sure, he had to get the man down from his perch if he wanted to make any progress. But how? His four years running Yarrowside hadn't equipped him for this. He'd looked after people barely out of comas; he'd cared for several, like David, whose memory loss had severed their link with reality; and he'd helped several people, like Katherine and Paul, through the final stages of rehabilitation. He'd dealt with speech impediments, cognitive deficits, and uncontrollable mood swings.

This was different. With this man he had nothing to go on, not even the pathology. The only way forward would be to take a gallingly mediaeval approach: he'd have to treat the man like an animal, gaining his confidence through passivity, perseverance and sheer bribery.

He returned to the house, quietly opened the door and sneaked into the kitchen. Food, the most obvious of trust-winners where animals were concerned. He opened the fridge and scanned the shelves. It was all far too healthy. Certainly not what one would expect of a family with two young kids. Surely there was something amongst the white meat, salad, fresh fruit and home-made yoghurt that might tempt the man down.

Thomas grinned. A jar of redcurrant jelly. Perfect. He snatched it up with the plate of turkey leftovers and closed the fridge. Alice was standing in the doorway.

"A midnight snack? I thought you were too old for all that?" she said sarcastically

Thomas looked guiltily down at the plate. He couldn't tell her the truth. Not yet, not until he knew a little more himself. She'd only berate him for putting them all at risk, then demand that he call the police. The Army would have their man, and Thomas would be left in the dark. And that was it, wasn't it? It wasn't altruism that was driving him, it was curiosity. He had to know the truth.

"Just a bit hungry, that's all," he told her as he peeled back the cellophane and popped a piece of turkey into his mouth.

"That was supposed to be our lunch," she reminded him.

He shrugged. "I'll go out and get something else in the morning."

"I'll hold you to that when you're still buried under the duvet at ten and I've already been up with the kids for three or four hours."

She said it scoldingly, but as soon as the words were loose, she seemed to soften. She stroked his forearm, then raised her hand to brush his floppy hair from his eyes, smiling timidly. "Don't be long coming to bed. It'll be light in a couple of hours and you know we're not likely to get much of a lie-in after all this. The girls were so excited, I had a hard time getting them off to sleep. They'll be all over us in the morning - and, as their brave rescuer, you'll be the star of the show."

Thomas awkwardly batted off the compliment. His modesty was a waste of time and he knew it. Alice knew full well how proud it would make him to have his daughters proclaim him a hero, and she was playing him like only she could, easing the tension between them like a well-practised diplomat.

She stood on tip-toes and kissed the bridge of his nose. "Don't be too long. I'm a bit shaken up, myself, and I'd appreciate a spot of tender loving care."

She squeezed his hand, then left the kitchen and disappeared upstairs.

"You'll never make sergeant if we get caught doing this."

Scott tutted as he flattened out the thick woollen blanket. "You know I'd happily give up a promotion if it meant I could spend just one whole night wrapped up in that beautiful, smooth skinned body of yours."

"Don't try that crap with me, Scott. I know the Army's your life and I'm perfectly capable of dealing with that - *I'm* here for the long haul, too, remember? But, if we carry on like this, the Sarge'll be all over us."

"Come on," he goaded her. He eased himself down onto the blanket and stared up at the low metal roof. His eyes were still growing accustomed to the darkness. "Everyone knows about us."

She laughed and lay down beside him. "Yeah, you're hardly the subtlest of lovers. But we've talked about this before, Scott, and you still insist on raising the stakes every time. I doubt Sergeant Hammond'll turn a blind eye to this. And the moment his patience runs out, we're out on our arses."

He tugged wistfully at her shirt buttons. "Will you marry me?" he asked at last. It had been on his mind for weeks but, until now, he'd been afraid to broach the subject.

"Oh, I'm sure that'd go down really well."

"I'm serious. In secret. Right here and now. Come on, we've been together almost two years now and every day I love you more than the one before."

She laughed again as he undid the last of her buttons and slid his hand across her stomach. "I can't believe you're proposing to me in the back of an Apache helicopter in the middle of the Rwandan jungle. Aren't you supposed to ask my father for permission?"

He shook his head slowly, taking in the smooth, moonlit skin of her face. They were orphans, both of them. There would be no nervous first meeting with her parents and no asking for her hand in marriage. The Army and each other were all they had. He stroked her cheek as tenderly as he could manage, his index finger tracing the gentle three inch scar that ran diagonally from her left ear to the line of her jaw.

"Well?" he prompted her.

"Don't we need a priest or something?"

"For what? Neither of us is religious."

"Even so, isn't someone supposed to make it all official - and aren't there supposed to be witnesses?"

“The whole point is that it’s *not* official,” he groaned, rolling onto his back. “And the last thing we want is witnesses. It’s supposed to be a secret.”

She rolled on top of him, taking her turn to unbutton his shirt. Kissing him hard, she tugged it off him and threw it onto the pilot’s seat. Moments later, she pushed herself upright, kneeling across his waist. He lifted his hands behind her, following her spine as he stroked his way slowly from the centre to the small of her back, then up to the nape of her neck. She was breathing heavily now and he slid the shirt from her shoulders and onto the floor. God, she was beautiful. Tall at five foot nine but still a good six inches shorter than him. A perfectly formed, sun-kissed oval face framed with close-cropped auburn hair and finished with a long-lashed pair of smouldering, dark brown eyes. He teased the edges of her small, perfectly shaped breasts with the backs of his hands, all the while watching the deepening expansion and contraction of her softly toned stomach muscles.

“God, I love you,” she purred, tugging at his belt. “Let’s do it. Right here, right now. You and me, married in secret in the back of an Apache.”

They fumbled with the remaining halves of each others uniforms until at last they lay naked, side by side on the blanket with their arms wrapped tight around each other. Scott stared into those dark brown eyes.

“Okay,” she smiled, her breath heavy with anticipation. “Who goes first?”

He shrugged.

She tutted playfully and rolled her eyes. “You men haven’t got a clue, have you? Well, I believe tradition says it’s the groom who gets asked first. So, will you, Scott Andrew Wilson, take me, Josephine Gardner...”

Scott sniggered and they both erupted with laughter. ‘Josephine’ was traditionally the name Sergeant Hammond used either in ridicule or to get her attention. Scott and the others had always called her ‘Stretch’, an ill-fitting nickname from school, to which she was inexplicably attached.

“Okay, again,” she said once she’d composed herself. “Will you take me to be your unofficial wedded wife? Will you love me and respect me, be honest with me and stand by me, through whatever may come?”

“Have you done this before?” he asked incredulously.

She frowned. “I’m a girl. I’ve been rehearsing this moment since I was five. Now answer the question.”

“I will?”

“Don’t sound so unsure about it. You’re the one who proposed, remember?”

He grinned and kissed between her eyebrows. “I will,” he repeated.

“Okay, your turn.”

“Er, will you, Lance Corporal Stretch Gardner, take me, your dotting superior, to be your unofficial wedded husband? Will you love me and respect me, be... honest with me and stand by me...”

“Through whatever may come,” she finished in a whisper. “You bet I will.”

They stared into each others eyes for a moment, their faces serious, filled with commitment and adoration. “You may be determined to get the two of us in no end of trouble, Scott, but I reckon you’re worth it anyway. You make me laugh, you make me smile and you make me so emotional it’s nauseating. I love you.”

“And I love you, *wife*.”

Her face brightened with a wide smile and she rolled him onto his back once more, tangling her legs in his as she covered his neck and chest with kisses.

Distracted as he was, Scott still heard the rustling outside, a slow but concerted movement through the surrounding foliage. Someone was edging closer and closer to the grounded Apache.

He raised a finger to Stretch’s lips, a slight nod drawing her attention to the noise. She slid off of him, gathering up her clothes and passing him his discarded trousers. Scott cursed himself for leaving his beloved 9mm Browning in the locker beside his bed. True enough, they were in hostile territory, but he’d never expected this.

They caught an indecipherable whisper only a few yards from the chopper. Stretch’s eyes narrowed. She slipped on her shirt and hurriedly refastened the buttons. Scott battled with his trousers, half inside out and a frustrating tangle in the moonlight. Did the intruders know they were here? Would they slip past the Apache without realising they’d left two unarmed soldiers behind them? Shit, he wished he’d brought the Browning.

He was still tugging on his trousers when the chopper’s side door flew open. A blaze of light and the sound of automatic weapons being primed. Fuck, it was all over. It had been his idea, this late night liaison in the Apache, an irresistible escalation from the backseats of jeeps and trucks and the unwatched shadows of countless Army depots. At every stage of their clandestine relationship, he’d been determined to up the stakes. Now his desperate need for another cheap thrill was about to get them killed. There would be no court-martial or dishonourable discharge. He and his ‘wife’ would pay a far greater price for their disobedience.

“Don’t you guys know there’s a war on?” The torch beams dropped to the floor of the Apache to reveal the blue UN helmets of the three men outside.

“You fucking asshole, Vallier,” Scott snapped as he secured his belt. “We thought you were...”

“Guerrillas? Rebels? The creatures from the Black Lagoon?” Vallier finished in his deep, rumbling voice. “Yeah, right, Wilson. We’re a peacekeeping force. Nothing ever happens to a peace-keeping force.”

“Seriously, Vallier, if I’d had the Browning with me, I might have blown you away.”

“Yeah, right, mate,” Vallier scoffed, shovelling a spoonful of mash into his mouth. “I guess we were just lucky you packed a packet of three instead of your trusty water pistol.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. There’s no getting through to you, is there? We really thought you were a bunch of guerrillas, didn’t we Stretch?”

Stretch nodded and waved her spoon at the three men opposite. “You can’t go sneaking around like that, especially pointing semi-automatic weapons at people. One of these days someone’s going to get hurt.”

Lance Corporal Vallier chuckled. He leaned forward across the table and patted Scott’s bristly head. “Getting the missus to speak up for us now, are we Wilson?”

The other two laughed. Stretch covered her mouth to stop herself.

“That’s *Corporal* Wilson to you, Vallier,” Scott reminded his subordinate.

Vallier snapped to seated attention. “Yes, Corporal. Sorry, Corporal, but I don’t think it’s wise to be shagging the missus in the back of an Apache, Corporal!”

Stretch was laughing with the others now. Scott felt himself grinning in spite of himself.

“Keep it down, all right?” he almost sniggered. “You three have caused enough trouble already.”

“Mum’s the word, Corporal Nine Millimetre.”

“Mum’s the word,” the other two chorused.

“Christ, you three piss me off sometimes,” Scott smiled.

“Thank you, Corporal,” they chorused again.

“They’re getting worse,” Scott groaned as he and Stretch took their trays to the trolley. “Sometimes I wonder if they’ll ever take me seriously.”

Stretch shrugged. “I hate to say it, Corporal, but those boyish looks of yours are going to haunt you all the way to the top.”

He sighed. “You’re right. I reckon I’m going to have to get myself a big old wiry moustache if I’m going to make it to sergeant by the time I’m fifty.”

Stretch shuddered. “You’ll be hearing from my solicitors about an unofficial divorce if you start growing one of those,” she said quietly.

“Aw, you wouldn’t give your new hubby the flick just because of a harmless bit of facial hair, would you?”

Her expression said it all.

“I guess the honeymoon’s over, then?” he whispered in her ear before he turned and left the mess tent.

He strode across the dirt to the khaki tents where he and the other NCOs had slept for the past six weeks. It was midday and the summer heat was almost unbearable, despite the altitude. He had to get out of the sun. Seven years’ service in some of the hottest places on earth and he still hadn’t got used to tropical and equatorial climates. Oh, to be back in England, where the sun barely ever shone and your daily dose of drizzle kept you from dehydrating. A month and a half they’d been stuck on this plateau in the heart of the jungle, a month and a half in the baking heat in the middle of the dry season. Somewhere to the west, left of the volcanic peaks that loomed on the horizon, was Lake Kivu. He’d have given anything to be there now, swimming naked in the cool deep water with Stretch at his side. The last British lot had been there, or so they’d said when H Platoon had arrived to relieve them. Their descriptions had haunted him ever since.

He was inside the tent now, out of the direct sunlight but still stifled by the heat. He walked slowly between the two rows of bunks, coming to a halt at the end of his own. The top bunk was Vallier’s, the bottom was his. It had always been this way, everywhere they’d been. In Hammond’s platoon, close surnames meant close sleeping arrangements. And only the sergeant himself got his own tent.

He opened the small locker beside the bed and stared at the dark bulk of the Browning. Shaking his head he lifted it from its shelf and balanced it on the broad palm of his right hand. Just as well he hadn’t had it with him. The closeness of the jungle made him nervous. It should have occurred to him that the people outside the Apache would most likely be friendlies, sentries from either his own company or the French contingent. And, at his rank, with tensions such as they were, he shouldn’t have been mucking about in a restricted area. He loved the Army and he embraced the need for discipline. So why they hell couldn’t he do as he was told?

It was Stretch, of course. She filled him with a sense of adventure, made him feel as mischievously boyish as he looked. He smiled to himself at that. Seven years of active service and he still had the painfully unblemished features of a new recruit. No scar like Stretch’s, no unconquerable five o’clock shadow like Vallier’s or Hammond’s. Just a smooth chin that barely needed shaving twice a week and the steely grey eyes that were enough to put just about any overly boisterous private or lance corporal in their place.

It was those same eyes Stretch had apparently fallen in love with, three years ago in Macedonia. H Platoon had been young then, a new specialist peace-keeping force only nominally attached to its regiment. Unusually, the fifty of them had been drawn from a variety of different regiments, personally selected by a board of respected majors whose criteria were still unknown to anyone but themselves. Scott still remembered the tests he'd undergone back in his old regiment: rigorous health and fitness checks, simulation after simulation, paper and pen tests, over-the-top personality profiling and lengthy questionnaires to determine his attitude to life in the armed forces. He'd done his mandatory four years by then, had just been promoted to Lance Corporal and was determined to go the full twenty two. A transfer into what was touted as a crack platoon, had been a godsend - even more so seeing as his own regiment was destined to spend the next eighteen months in Northern Ireland.

Ultimately, apart from the weather, the transfer had more than lived up to expectations. The names and faces of the old regiment were little more than a blur now. The members of H Platoon were a close-knit family where his old platoon had been little more than comrades in arms. And, of course, he had Stretch. It had taken almost ten months of sideways glances and secretive smiles to bring them together in a shell-damaged alley one drunken off-duty night in Tetovo. For the next three months, they'd tried their best to keep things under control. But, despite explicit regulations banning sexual activity between platoon members, they had failed at every turn. Scott shrugged to himself as he wiped the ever-present dust from the barrel of his gun. What did they expect? They put men and women together in the same platoon, put them on the edge of just about every flare-up the world had to offer and then they told them to keep their hands off each other.

"Watch it, Wilson. The missus'll get jealous."

Scott laid the gun back on its shelf. "Are you determined to get my back up today?"

Vallier chuckled behind him. "What'll Stretch do when you finally make it to Captain and get to trade in the SA-80 forever? Captain Scott Wilson and his trusty Browning. She won't get a look in."

Scott turned to face him. He liked Vallier, always had done. As much as the man took the piss out of him, he knew deep down that he had his respect. Vallier's huge black bulk had hung above him for the best part of three years. They'd trained side by side in the early days of H Platoon and they'd been under fire together in the shattered towns of Eastern Europe and the jungles of Kalimantan. Vallier's banter was a mark of his respect and, so far, rank had yet to become a problem. But if Scott made sergeant before Vallier was promoted to corporal, they both knew the banter would have to end. What then? How would Scott know for sure that Vallier was still on his side?

"What's the story outside?" he asked his friend, eager to redirect his thoughts.

“The usual,” Vallier groaned. “Rumours of troop movements up near Ruhengeri. Some seemingly random mortar attacks on Gisenyi. UN-moderated talks with the Congolese back in Kigali. Basically, bugger all progress on all fronts.”

“Christ, I wish they’d just get on with it so we can get back to the Balkans. I’m so sick of this heat.”

“Stuff that,” Vallier objected. “Even a black-skinned donkey-dong like me winds up with a dick like a chipolata over there. Give me a bit of tropical heat, any time.”

Scott grinned. “Vallier, it’s the middle of summer in Europe. It’d be fine. Nice sunny days and cool nights. The kind of weather where you can wear a nice light shirt, but you don’t spend all day and night coated in a layer of sweat - and you’re not surrounded by swarms of mosquitoes whose only purpose in life is to bite the living shit out of you...”

Vallier laughed and slapped him firmly on the shoulder. Scott may have been six foot three, but Vallier was almost his height and a good deal meatier. “That’s the trouble with you white blokes: no bloody stamina.”

They sat in a small circle outside the men’s tent, under the pale light of a half moon. From her position at Scott’s side, Stretch watched Vallier staring wistfully across the wide expanse of dirt at the shadowy entrance to the women’s tent. Lewis and Fryer, the two privates who’d been on sentry duty with Vallier the night before, sat either side of him. While Lewis scratched irritably at his mosquito bites, Fryer drew abstract shapes in the dirt.

“You know. I reckon I need to get me some of what you guys have got,” Vallier said at last, exhaling the smoke from a much-needed Marlboro. “Over there is a whole tent full of sex-starved women just waiting for the Tufnell Park Casanova to come and put them out of their misery.”

“Yeah, Vallier,” Scott laughed, tossing a handful of dirt at him. “We’ve seen them queuing up for the privilege. What was it you called yourself this afternoon? A black-skinned donkey dong? ‘Tufnell Park Casanova’, my arse. You’re as bad as me. If you hadn’t joined the Army, you’d still be selling dodgy TVs and DVD players in the backstreets of Kentish Town. Your idea of chatting someone up’s a quick couple of cans of Stella and a trip to the pictures for a sly back seat grope.”

“Oh, come on, Wilson. Just ‘cos you’ve got the pick of the bunch, doesn’t mean you’ve got to go belittling the rest of us.”

Stretch knew full well that Vallier had taken the jibe as intended; she smiled as Scott continued his assault. “Aw, did I ‘belittle’ the legendary love truncheon?” he pouted. “And I thought it was just cold weather that could do that...”

“Oh, I dunno,” Fryer jumped in. “I reckon some of those girls in there could send any bloke’s old man packing, quicker than a winter dip in Lake Prespa.”

“Easy, Fryer. Those are my tentmates you’re slagging off,” Stretch reprimanded him with a glint in her eye. As repetitive as they sometimes were, she loved these exchanges. Vallier and his cronies - and Scott, too, at times - were everything she’d imagined brothers to be: funny, over-the-top and obnoxious.

“Did I slag them off?” Fryer asked their audience, with wide eyes and upraised palms. “You know full well, Mrs Wilson,” - she resisted the urge to throw Scott a meaningful glance - “that I would trust any one of those girls with my life, just as they’d trust me with theirs. But I don’t think we’re likely to end up in the sack together, rules or no rules, drought or no drought.”

“What about the Frogs, then?” Lewis suggested as he coated himself with another layer of Deet-heavy insect repellent.

Vallier raised an eyebrow and looked to their left, where the French troops were camped.

Fryer pondered the question for a moment before beating him to a verdict. “Well, they certainly aren’t much more to look at than our home-grown grizzlies - oop, did I say that?”

Stretch pelted him with a shower of dirt. Scott laughed beside her. Their thighs were almost touching. Almost, but not quite. Any closer and they’d attract attention.

“They may not look all that great, but they’re foreign, which in my eyes is a major bonus, and they don’t speak much English, which means you won’t have to waste too much time chatting one up. Plus, I’ve heard the whole country’s gagging for it. Can’t get enough of it, they reckon. Getting jiggy is a national pastime.”

“Sounds perfect,” Vallier rumbled his approval.

“Except, in my extremely limited experience, French birds are renowned for having armpit hair denser than the Rwandan jungle,” Fryer told him.

“And twice as hard on the nose,” Scott added. “Don’t forget, the French have hardly got a reputation for obsessive personal hygiene.”

“So they’re dirty slags,” Vallier shrugged. “Sounds perfect.”

All mouth and no trousers, Stretch thought to herself. In the three years they’d been together neither Vallier nor the others had had so much as a sniff of unpaid sex. It wasn’t that they were unattractive - Vallier’s physique would have been fantasy material to many women - it was more their pack mentality. That and the fact that, to them, everything was a potential source of communal amusement. Still, she had to play the game. “You guys are incorrigible,” she groaned.

"Ooh, a big word," Fryer ribbed her. "Did they call you 'Stretch' 'cos of all the long words you used at school?"

"Nah," Vallier laughed. "It's 'cos she was always so flexible behind the bike sheds."

"Where *do* you two get off?" She kicked a hail of dirt at them. The truth was, the name had been with her so long she could barely remember its origins. Something to do with a comic book superhero, or some long forgotten cartoon. "I sometimes wonder how either of you managed to get transferred into what's supposed to be an elite fighting unit. Surely, someone in Clerical made a tragic mistake."

"Brawn," Scott pointed out. "The majors figured there was already more than enough brains to go round, what with you and me already pegged for transfer. They decided too much intelligence in one platoon would only confuse things, so they chose these three - yeah, Lewis, you're as bad as the other two - they chose these three to balance things up. All brawn and no brains."

"Oh, don't you just love it when he compliments your physique?" Vallier crowed, camping it up. "And when he comes up with all these clever put downs... It makes me want to grab him by those gangly arms of his and spank his pert Corporal backside."

"Lord save us," Stretch cried out, startling the French sentries at the edge of the compound. "Is there no end to this madness?"

Stretch lay in the darkness, listening to the sounds of the other women sleeping. It seemed most of her life had been spent in beds like these. Here, though, she was more than just another body in a row of bunks. She had a number, sure, but in the Army she had friends. Back in the children's home where she'd spent the greater part of her teens, high turnover and the need to appear tough in the eyes of others had prevented her from forming any deep or lasting relationships.

It was there that she'd become a loner, so different from the excitable, affectionate child she could only vaguely remember all these years later. The nickname she'd picked up at school had become a shield to protect her from the attentions of older, rougher kids. They'd had different upbringings to hers, far crueller childhoods than she could ever have imagined had she not been thrown into their world by the death of her parents. It had been clear from the start that, for many of them, there was no real hope of redemption. But it would never have occurred to her that her own prognosis might be much the same.

She waved an insistent mosquito from her face and cast her mind back to the first few years that had followed her parents' death. Initially, her mother's parents had taken her in. She'd been almost eleven years old then - she vividly remembered that painful birthday without her mum and dad. She realised now that her grandparents had tried their best to be kind, to offer support and understanding,

but Stretch had been unable to adjust. Finally, after a year of truancies and disappearances, they'd been forced to admit defeat.

In her first foster home she'd been even worse. Bitter that her only remaining family had deserted her, the twelve year old Stretch had worked hard to render herself unmanageable. In spite of their repeated attempts to include her, she had refused to so much as speak to her foster parents' own children. Lying on her bunk in Rwanda, surrounded by the men and women she now saw as family, it all seemed so desperately ironic. The only other time she'd been offered the siblings she'd always wanted, she had rejected them. It was parents she needed, she had convinced herself then, not brothers and sisters to steal away their undivided attention.

Within two years of leaving her grandparents, Stretch moved out of her last foster home and into Heathland's, where she was due to spend her teenage years. There she mellowed a little, bowing inexplicably to the authority of the staff. She kept her head down, toughening up while at the same time harbouring a secret desire to win their approval. Luckily for Stretch, Gemma had seen straight through her.

Gemma may have been new to Heathland's when they'd first met, but she was an acknowledged miracle worker in the world of Social Services. At forty three, Gemma was childless. She had decided to devote that latter half of her life to rescuing the likes of Stretch from what she called 'the inevitabilities of institutional upbringing'. Coarse at times and hilarious at others, Gemma drew upon first-hand experience to build a rapport with the kids that, as hard as they tried, none of the other staff could emulate.

It was Gemma who'd encouraged Stretch to join the Army. She herself had signed up at eighteen. After fifteen years as an NCO, she had finally accepted she'd never see combat and had opted instead for a career in social work, where she could be 'effectively active on the front line'.

But it had been a decade since Gemma had hung up her uniform in favour of the stereotypical slacks and cardigans of the DSS, and things had changed. Slowly but surely, women were gaining almost equal status in all three of the armed forces, most of all the Army. The involvement of women in battle was imminent.

Gemma had recognised Stretch's quiet respect for authority, as well as her need for 'positive reinforcement' from superiors and peers alike. That Stretch was also smart, strong, and determinedly adventurous apparently made a career in the Army an obvious choice.

Although Stretch had, at times, suspected her of trying to relive her life through a protégé, Gemma had been right about many things. Stretch was almost perfect NCO material. Her application at seventeen had earned her a place by the time of her eighteenth birthday. At nineteen she was a

respected member of an all-female platoon and by twenty she'd been one of the first women to see combat. For Gemma's forty-seventh birthday, Stretch had sent her mentor a single used shell casing - the first live round she'd fired in battle. There was no letter to accompany her gift; the message was clear. Stretch had succeeded in escaping Gemma's 'inevitable' of institutional upbringing'. She was another happy ending, another feather in Gemma's already overcrowded hat. But, much more than that, she had lived the older woman's dream of making it to the front line.

Gemma's response was as caring as ever. Eight pages of congratulation and concern. Was combat a regular thing for women now? How was Stretch coping with the rigours of Army life? How had she dealt with the bloody reality of battle? Still the same old cardiganed crusader, Stretch had laughed to herself. She had done her best to set the woman's mind at ease, but it was obvious that - in spite of Gemma's enthusiasm for equal rights in the military - the thought of one of her girls under fire filled her with nothing but dread.

Stretch sighed. How fantastic it would have been to see Gemma now, to share last night's events with her. How surprised she would have been to hear that the ice girl of Heathland's had fallen so desperately in love. Fearing disclosure, Stretch had said nothing of him in her occasional letters home. Neither had she returned to Heathland's since the day she'd joined up. The Army was her home now and any leave she took she spent with her colleagues. To go back to Heathland's, or even civilian Britain, was to revisit the past, and she was more than happy with the present.

In the three years since the formation of H Platoon, Gemma had not replied to any of Stretch's letters. Stretch had continued to write, but as her relationship with Scott had bloomed, she had found herself with increasingly little to say. How could she devote page after page to the daily routine or the ludicrous banter of her friends, when all she really wanted to share was the glorious awakening of her battered heart?

She thought of Scott and smiled. Through a mixture of patience, empathy and guile, Gemma had gradually earned herself a place in Stretch's heart. Scott had outdone her with little more than a cheeky sideways glance.

When Stretch had joined the Army it had been in search of discipline and advancement. Not once had it crossed her mind that she might wind up in the back of an Apache, pledging to 'love and respect, be honest with and stand by' a tall, dark and handsome Corporal 'through whatever may come'. Throughout basic training, she'd assumed the barriers she'd built at Heathland's would keep her isolated and alone throughout her career in the Army. She'd expected to be ridiculed at first, then left to herself, never liked but always respected - just as she had been countless times before. She'd been wrong. From the beginning she'd been part of a team. She rarely had time to think of herself as an

individual. When she did, she was almost always too exhausted to withdraw behind her old impregnable defences.

Maybe Gemma had weakened her defences, or maybe it was simply a product of Army life. Whatever, her new-found openness had been enough for Scott to smuggle his way inside through no greater guile than the twinkle in his steely grey eyes.

H Platoon had been the perfect setting. They were all from similar backgrounds. They'd all survived unpleasant childhoods - more than survived, they'd all emerged relatively unscathed. Those who had parents would have rather been orphans. Those who'd grown up with a family around them had left as soon as possible.

Their similarities were all part of the plan, they'd been told on their first days together. Their common histories would bring them together, just as their upbringings would help them sympathise with the disenfranchised - the orphans, refugees and POWs they'd be protecting on their various missions across the globe. Additionally, H Platoon would rarely return to Britain. Its members would spend most of their time abroad in the service of NATO or the UN. Consequently, the platoon was to be made up of men and women with no strong desire to go home. According to their personality profiles, their attitude to the past was ideal - none of them wanted anything to do with it.

Unlike at Heathland's where, for Stretch, loneliness had served only to isolate, here a common background proved a catalyst for comfort and lasting friendship. Boosted by this sense of camaraderie, she had first met Scott as the long lost Stretch of her childhood rather than as the angry teenager from Heathland's.

Over the past two years, Scott had nourished the excitable child in her and finally uncovered the well of affection that had lain untapped for over a decade. Gemma would hardly have recognised her. Her grandparents might perhaps have forgiven her for that difficult year when they'd tried in vain to care for and comfort her. But she could say nothing of her transformation to any of them. Letters were notoriously open to scrutiny by The Powers That Be, and discovery of her relationship with Scott would mean the end of the line for both of them. But perhaps this lack of openness was for the best. With Gemma no longer responding, there was nothing to link her with the world she'd left behind, a world she feared a great deal more than the guerrilla-infested jungle that surrounded her.

Still, she thought as she felt herself finally drifting off to sleep, she could do without this heat.

“Wake up, Daddy! Wake up!”

Thomas groaned and rolled into the centre of the bed. He was exhausted. Lie-ins were a thing of the distant past, but this particular Sunday morning was the worst in years. Besides the fact that he’d been up until dawn coaxing their strange visitor down from the rafters of the shed, Kate and Ellie were at least two hours earlier than usual. Normally they’d have entertained themselves quietly with the TV, or Ellie would have tried in vain to interest her older sister in some simplistic board game. Today, though, they were spurred on by the previous night’s excitement.

“Dad, tell us what happened,” Kate insisted, tugging at the duvet as Thomas hid himself from their miniature inquisition. “Mum said you scared him off. She said you chased him over the fence. She said she’d never seen a man run so fast, didn’t you, Mum?”

“Is that really what you said?” Thomas whispered to his wife as they hid beneath the duvet.

“Well, I had to tell them something. They’d never have gone to sleep if they knew we’d no idea where he’d gone to. And I didn’t think it would do any harm to portray their father as a hero.”

“I suppose not.” He eased his head out from under the duvet to find himself staring directly into Kate’s demanding hazelnut eyes. Ellie peered round her. She held her much-loved teddy bear, Teddy Edward, tucked protectively under her arm.

“So, Dad, did you get in a fight?” Kate pressed him.

“Kate, dads don’t get into fights,” Thomas sighed, propping himself up against his pillow.

“Max Holford’s dad did,” she protested. “They had a burglar come into their house once and Mr Holford smacked him in the face. Then he dragged him downstairs and booted him out of the front door.”

Alice’s head appeared over the duvet. “Your friend Max is a little fibber,” she told her daughter. “The Holfords were burgled two years ago, when they were away at Max’s grandparents for Christmas. Since then, Mr Holford has wired the place up with so many alarms and what-nots that no burglar would go anywhere near the place.”

Kate scowled, turning her attention back to her father. “But you scared him off, didn’t you? Mum said she’d never seen anyone run so fast. Was he as big as you, Dad?”

Thomas paused for a moment. He looked at his wife as he thought things through. Beneath the duvet, she prodded him in the ribs.

“He was about as tall as me, but twice as wide. He had a skinhead, too. You’d have been terrified.”

Ellie clearly was. She hugged Teddy Edward to her chest and watched her father from behind the squashed bear's fluffy head.

"So, what did you do, Dad? Did you hit him with that broom handle?"

"Well, I tried, Kate, but he'd come armed with a pitchfork. He swung it at me and almost knocked me out."

"Were you scared?" Ellie asked fearfully, twisting her fingers through her long, honey coloured hair.

"Not at all, Ellie. Dads don't get scared."

"So, what then?" Alice encouraged him.

"Well, he stabbed at me with the pitchfork. I jumped aside and whacked it with the broom handle. It must have stung his hands, because he yelped and dropped it..."

"Was that when he ran at you and grabbed you by the throat?" Alice prompted.

Thomas nodded, raising an eyebrow at his wife. "Have I got any marks around my neck?"

Kate jumped onto the bed and examined him. "No," she groaned disappointedly.

"Your father may be getting on a bit, but he still heals quickly," Alice chuckled.

"So, how did you stop him strangling you?" Kate wanted to know.

"Well, I picked him up like this..." He lifted Kate into the air. "And I hurled him onto the grass." He bounced the girl on the bed and lowered her to the floor.

"Then the man jumped back to his feet," Alice continued. "He could hear the helicopter coming back, and he knew he was no match for your dad, so he turned and ran. Your dad chased him to the fence, but the man was a professional cat burglar and he leapt over it. So Dad left him to the police. It took three of them to catch him and they took him away to prison."

"Will he get the electric chair?" Kate asked, her eyes lighting up.

"No, Kate. People don't get the electric chair here, only in America. And, even over there, they don't get the death penalty just for snooping around in people's gardens..."

"But you said he was a professional cat burglar," Kate objected.

"Yes, and they don't get the electric chair for that either."

"Why not?"

"Because they don't deserve to," Thomas told her. "They haven't hurt anybody."

"But they hurt pussycats," Ellie insisted.

Thomas smiled. He reached forward and took his daughter's hand, pulling her towards him. He stroked her long hair and looked into her stony grey eyes. "They don't hurt pussycats, Sweet-pea. They're called cat burglars because they move like cats. They can climb walls you and I would never think possible."

“So they could climb in through our window?”

Thomas checked a sigh. This was his doing. His fawning and over-protectiveness had left her fragile and afraid, the antithesis of her sister. “He probably could, if you left it open, but he wouldn’t want to. Professional cat burglars are only after rich pickings. They don’t steal from little girls’ piggy banks, only from great big safes and bank vaults. They don’t bother with little people like you.”

“So what was he doing in our garden?” Kate asked him.

What, indeed? “Well, I shouldn’t really tell you this, and you’d better not tell a soul, but there’s a secret bank vault less than a mile from this spot. It’s built into an old underground bomb shelter that’s been abandoned since The Second World War and belongs to a Swiss bank, one of the richest banks in the world. My guess is our cat burglar was looking for that vault. Who knows, maybe he found it...”

“But if it’s underground, why would a cat burglar be looking for it?”

“Kate, they don’t *have* to climb walls. It’s just something they happen to be very good at. They’re also masters of safe-cracking.”

Thomas crossed his arms and relaxed against the pillows, a look of smug satisfaction on his face. He’d given Alice, and the kids, exactly what they’d wanted.

“So, what’s the big secret?”

Thomas took a deep breath. He’d sent the kids downstairs to watch TV so he could tell his wife the truth. Now that they were alone, he was far less confident in his decision to offer the stranger his help. Sure, his plan was admirable. But, even if the man proved not to be a direct threat to his family’s safety, the act of harbouring a fugitive could still cause them a great deal of grief.

“Last night, when those policemen searched the shed, they didn’t do a very good job of it,” he began.

Alice’s eyes widened. “What, you mean he *was* in there? Christ, Thomas, how long have you known this? Why didn’t you call the Police?”

“I found him soon after they left. I went into the shed to check it out for myself and he was hiding up in the rafters.”

“So you knew when I spoke to you in the kitchen,” she concluded. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me? And why didn’t you get the Police back?”

“I wanted some time alone with him... Don’t look at me like that...”

“He’s still here, isn’t he? You didn’t see him off, you let him spend the night in our shed. Thomas, the man’s on the run. He could have killed you. He could have hurt the kids...”

“He could have done nothing of the sort,” he interrupted. “The man’s suffered some sort of trauma. I don’t know what exactly. I don’t even know whether it’s a physical problem or some kind of functional disorder. What I *do* know, though, is that he isn’t dangerous. I had my back to him in the shed before I found him. He could have attacked me at any time...”

“Maybe he was afraid of that broom handle,” she suggested.

“The broom handle was leaning up against the door. He’d have reached it far quicker than I could have.”

“So you went in there totally unarmed?” She was furious.

“No, I had a whacking great knife in my pocket. But I didn’t need it, Alice. The guy didn’t even run away when he could have. He was too scared. It took me the best part of an hour to coax him down from the rafters.”

“So what’s wrong with him?”

“Well, as I said, I’m not sure what the cause is. I can’t find any signs of a head injury, but his body is covered in tiny cuts and I think he’s been wired up to an ECG or some other sort of monitor - possibly for quite some time. He could have been subjected to electro-shock treatment or an inappropriate dosage of drugs...”

“You’re doing a pretty awful job of reassuring me, Thomas.”

He rolled his tongue around in his mouth, thinking things through.

“Thomas, we’ve got to call the Police. If the Army are searching for him, he’s must be in some sort of trouble...”

“And what if the Army are mistreating him, Alice? What if he’s just managed to escape from some sort of barbaric experiment? You remember what they did to servicemen in the 1950s and 60s, telling them they were experimenting with cold and flu viruses, then dosing them up with anthrax and Christ knows what else. What if they’ve moved on? What if they’re testing out all sorts of other things on innocent men and women, and this man’s condition is a direct result of their experiments? Do we just wrap him up in a big pink bow and send him back?”

She looked down at her hands but said nothing.

“He needs our help, Alice. He can’t speak, he hasn’t understood a word I’ve said to him, and he’s terrified. Everything’s alien to him. It’s like he’s from another planet - or he’s got the worst case of amnesia I’ve ever heard of.”

“Maybe he’s just lost his marbles,” she snapped, looking up at him. “Maybe they’ve fried his brain and he’ll spend the rest of his life as a vegetable...”

“Maybe he has, but I doubt it...”

“Oh, here we go. Four years running a day centre for the bewildered and, all of a sudden, you’re an expert...”

“No, I’m not an expert, but I can recognise intelligence and awareness when I see them. This guy’s nothing like David. He’s not stuck in some endless loop and he’s certainly got no problems paying attention or taking things in. In fact, he’s pretty switched on.”

“Marvellous, so he’s some kind of idiot savant?”

“Look, Alice, I can understand why you’re upset. I admit, going out there probably wasn’t the most sensible thing to do. But that doesn’t change the fact that he needs our help - my help, at least. Just come downstairs and see him for yourself.”

She swallowed and looked down at the backs of her hands again.

“Just trust me, Alice, please.”

She sighed and nodded. “But if I don’t agree with you, what then?”

He licked his lips nervously. “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Still in their dressing gowns, Thomas and Alice crept downstairs, keen to avoid the girls’ attention. From the lounge they could hear Kate’s voice as she pretended to be her father, fighting off burglars in the form of a reluctant Ellie. They slunk through the kitchen and out into the garden. On the way, Alice pocketed the same knife Thomas had taken with him in the early hours of the morning.

The man woke with a start when they opened the door to the shed. He stared at them over the top of the dust sheet Thomas had given him as a blanket. Thomas could still see the fear in his eyes.

“Wait here,” he whispered to his wife. Then he walked slowly into the shed, dropping to a crouch as he came closer to his patient.

“This is my wife, Alice,” he said softly, smiling and gesturing in her direction. “She won’t hurt you; she just wants to meet you.”

Alice smiled nervously and nodded. She took a step forward. The man pushed himself backwards, dragging the dust sheet with him until he was up against the far wall.

“I see what you mean. He’s terrified,” Alice observed.

“I was hoping he’d trust me enough to let you get closer.”

“You’re right about him not being retarded,” she told him. “He’s more like an animal than an idiot. How did you get him to trust you last night?”

“The same way you would with an animal. I brought him some food.”

“Ah yes, the turkey. Was it really that simple?”

“Almost. I took my clothes off, too.”

"You what?"

"He was naked when I found him. It's a vulnerable state to be in, so I figured I'd even things out..."

"So you stripped off. And that worked, did it?"

"Eventually, but I think he was more impressed with the food."

"Lucky it's not the middle of winter," she grinned.

He smiled. He was winning her over. "So, what do you think?"

"What do I think? I think we'd be taking a risk if we kept him here, especially with the kids around. He could still turn out to be dangerous - and we're probably breaking the law hiding him from the Police and the Army. You're the ex-lawyer; *you tell me.*"

He led her outside and closed the shed door. "You're probably right. We'd be aiding and abetting a fugitive, which is of course illegal. The thing is, we don't know what we'd be returning him to if we handed him over. But, surely, you can see as well as I can that he's not dangerous - which the Police said he was. And if he's gone AWOL, it seems he might have good cause. Think of him as an asylum seeker..."

"And what do you propose to do with him?" she asked. "You can't look after him forever."

"Well, if I can keep him from getting stressed, the symptoms might well pass in a few days. If I can somehow find out who he is, then I can help him recover his memories. If not, then I can at least help him to rehabilitate. I've helped people rebuild their language functions before and I might be able to help him to regain some of his independence."

"And then what? Whether or not he deserves to be, he'll still be a criminal. He's hardly going to be able to carry on with a normal life, even if he makes a complete recovery."

"But if we can find out what happened to him, he might be able to press charges. Even if he doesn't actually *get* anywhere in court, the Army would probably disown him and leave him to get on with his life. Imagine this is you, Alice. Imagine you've been part of some bizarre experiment where they've fried your brains or pumped you so full of drugs you don't know who you were or why they're doing it to you. Then you escape. You're chased across the countryside by men in helicopters and heaven knows what else. You hideout in someone's shed and, by some stroke of fortune, your pursuers miss you. Then the owner of the shed finds you. You want so much to communicate with him, to tell him what's going on, but you can't. Everything he says is gibberish and you can't put your own jumbled thoughts into words. Then imagine he's someone who deals with head injuries on a daily basis, someone who might just be able to help you..."

"So what are you going to tell Judy and the rest of your staff and clients?"

"Nothing. I'm not going to get them involved."

"How are they *not* going to be involved? Yarrowside is hardly big enough for you to hide him from them."

"Alice, I want to keep him here. It's too risky to mix him in with the others and have their families see him or hear about him."

She sighed and looked down at her slippared feet. "You're not *asking* for my approval, are you?"

"Look, I want us to be in this together. I know it's a lot to ask and I know it's not exactly above board, but I'll be the one dealing with him and doing all the work."

"And what about the kids? What if he *does* become dangerous?"

"I'm positive he won't. He had the chance to attack me and he didn't. He wet himself in fear, for Christ's sake. He's so terrified I'm not sure I even believe he's a soldier. But you're right, we should play this as safely as possible. Maybe we should send the kids to your parents."

"What? You're saying we should send them away so some complete stranger can live in their house?"

"He won't be in the house. He'll stay in the shed. Besides, you know how much the girls love spending time with their grandparents..."

"One set of grandparents," she reminded him.

"Granted," he grimaced. "And who can blame them?"

"Mum, Dad," Kate called from the house. "There's a policeman at the front door."

Alice swallowed and waited for Thomas to make the next move.

"Tell him we'll be there in a second," he called out to their daughter. He turned to Alice. "Just let *me* do the talking, okay?"

She nodded and followed him down the side of the house.

"Can I help you?" Thomas asked as he and Alice emerged from the side of the house.

If the man on their doorstep was startled by their sudden appearance, he showed no sign of it. He smiled and turned to them. "Good morning, sir, Madam. Corporal Denbeigh..."

"My daughter said you were a policeman," Thomas interrupted.

"Military policeman," he smiled again. "We thought it best that I come out in civvies so I didn't cause you and your neighbours any unnecessary distress - what with this being a Sunday and all."

Thomas returned his smile. "So, I presume this has something to do with last night?"

"I'm afraid it does, sir. Unfortunately, as I've been telling your neighbours, our search drew a blank and the man is still at large. The hunt's still on and we're pretty certain he'll have left this area far behind, but we felt it better to be safe than sorry."

He produced a sheet of A4 paper and handed it over. Thomas looked down at the colour photo of the man in his shed without a hint of recognition.

“Is this the man you saw last night?” the MP asked him.

Thomas shrugged. “I can’t really tell. It was the middle of the night and he wasn’t really much more than a shadow from where I was standing.”

“What about the height and weight? Did the man you saw fit this description?”

“Possibly. I was looking down from my bedroom window. It’s hard to tell the difference between 5’7” and 6’1” from that distance. And I’ve never been much good at guessing people’s weight, anyway. He seemed pretty broad, if that’s any help.”

It clearly wasn’t. “Well, we’re pretty sure it was the man we’re after. Not that it matters now - he’s probably a good few miles away.”

“What did he do?” Alice asked him.

“Well, besides being absent without official leave, he assaulted his commanding officer. As far as we can work out, he’s come completely unhinged. Post traumatic stress, they reckon - he’s just returned from combat. Whatever the case, he’s highly trained and highly dangerous, which is why we’re warning you and your neighbours. If you see him, call the number on this flyer immediately. On no account should you try and approach him. Even a man of your stature would be at serious risk, sir, even if he wasn’t armed - which, as you’ll see on the flyer, he is. He stole a handgun during his escape, and he’s already used it once. He shot one of our men at point blank range only half an hour before he arrived in your garden.”

“But you reckon he’ll be long gone by now,” Thomas checked.

“Yes, we do. But, as I said, it’s best to be cautious in situations such as this.”

“Well, we’ll keep an eye out.”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll let you know as soon as we catch him.”

Corporal Denbeigh shook their hands, turned and walked down the garden path, heading to their neighbours’ house.

“There’s obviously something fishy going on,” Thomas said under his breath. “His story just doesn’t fit. Even if our man *was* capable of killing anybody, he’d have been covered in blood. ‘Point blank range,’ he said. But he’s hardly going to have stopped to clean himself up with half the Army at his heels, now is he?”

“Did he have a gun when you found him?”

“Nowhere I could see,” Thomas told her. “I suppose, if it was a small one, he could be hiding it up his backside. No, this doesn’t add up. I don’t know about you, Alice, but I don’t believe a word that man said.”

“All right,” she sighed at last.

He stared at her, waiting for the conditions, afraid to believe she might agree with him.

“But just for the week,” she insisted. “I want them back here for Ellie’s birthday on Saturday. That’s your deadline. If you can get anywhere with him by then, then we’ll reconsider. But he’s out at the first sign of trouble, okay?”

“Agreed.”

Scott was convinced he'd been dreaming when he snapped awake in the early hours just before dawn. The commotion in the tent told him otherwise. At the end of the bunk, Vallier was dragging on his combat gear. Lewis and Fryer, already dressed, were fetching magazines of live rounds from the locked cupboards at either end of the tent. They prepared and stacked them, ready for collection. Sergeant Hammond stood beside the central support post, barking his orders.

"Wilson, get your sorry arse out of bed," he snapped. "Vallier, why the hell didn't you wake him up?"

"My mistake, Sergeant. I'm sorry."

"Sorry won't do you any good when the Hammies have shot your legs from under you because your Corporal's still in bed."

Scott leapt out of bed, bleary eyed but quickly catching up. He slung on his gear and struggled to assess the situation. Hammond did the job for him.

"Right, lads, the Frogs'll be staying here to hold the fort. H Platoon'll be taking the battle to the enemy. We're taking fire from the North and the East, so you're to split into five units of ten and fan out to the South and West. Come round behind 'em and seek 'em out. Don't wait for confirmation, we have permission from Kigali to use all necessary force..."

He paused as a mortar shell exploded in the compound.

"Usual drill, mixed teams, same formation as in last week's practice run. You have three minutes to ready yourselves before the Frenchies draw their fire and you lot take to the jungle. Any questions?"

As always, there were none. Countless exercises and several live situations had prepared them for this and a host of similar eventualities. Hammond nodded his approval and marched from the tent.

Scott and Vallier spot-checked each other's equipment and their guns. Vallier's excitement was obvious. The huge black Lance Corporal had been itching for combat since they'd arrived. Where Scott preferred an urban setting, Vallier loved the jungle. Out here, what Scott saw as a threat, Vallier took for an opportunity. Razor grass and thick bracken were as much a blessing to him as they were a constant cause of frustration to his Corporal.

Vallier looked at his watch. "Twenty seconds," he called out to the others.

Everyone was ready, gear checked, semi-automatics in hand.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Captain Nine Millimetre?"

He was. Scott turned to the locker by his bunk and snatched the Browning from its shelf. He attached it to the holster on his belt. Not once had he been into combat without it. Not once had Hammond chastised him for his possession of a handgun.

“Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one... Go! Go! Go!”

Two abreast, the men jogged from either end of the long tent, breaking into a sprint as soon as they hit the open. The French were returning heavy fire to the North and East. The dense jungle was alive with the whistles of mortar fire. Shells detonated on both sides of the tree line. The smell of dirt and burnt wood filled the air.

Scott and Vallier ran towards the south end of the compound. Fryer, Lewis and the new man Shelton were close behind. The sun had yet to rise and the jungle was a dark mass beyond the dim lights of the comms station. Scott stared at the looming canopy with a sense of foreboding. Give him the city, any day. Put him a street lined with tumble-down buildings and filled with a mixture of guerrillas and innocents and he'd be in his element. He was a city boy at heart. An adolescence spent hopping in and out of trouble had awakened a keen awareness of the strategic intricacies of an urban arena. How Vallier had developed a love of jungles, being born and bred in north London, he would never understand.

At the opposite end of the compound, the sounds of battle were intensifying. The Congolese-trained Interahamwe guerrillas were pounding the encampment and the French were responding almost blindly. Scott waited impatiently with his team as the other British units headed into the darkness. Stretch was already out there, somewhere.

“Any sign of the girls?” he asked his second-in-command. The five female members of their team should have been with them by now.

“No sign at all.”

“Fuck it. They should be here by now. Everyone else has gone.”

Vallier shook his head, unhelpfully. Scott turned to the others.

“Fryer, Lewis, you two stay here with Vallier. Shelton, let's go and see what's holding them up.”

Leaving the others, Scott raced back across the compound with Shelton at his side. They were relatively safe at the centre of the defensive ring, but they kept low all the same. A stray bullet was as lethal as any other.

When they reached the tent, still supposedly well-protected from the assault, they found it burning. Thick smoke billowed from both ends, blocking out what little light there was. They sprinted across to their own tent, snatched a fire extinguisher each and returned to the rising flames. From the corner of his eye, Scott saw Sergeant Hammond racing towards them.

“Corporal, leave the tent and get your unit into that fucking jungle.”

“Half the unit’s missing, Sergeant. Chances are they’re caught inside.”

Hammond snatched the night sight from his own SA-80 and peered through it at the tent. “Shit!” he cursed. “Leave the fire extinguishers and go. There’s nothing you can do for them now. I’ll get the fire put out.”

Neither Scott nor Shelton lowered their extinguishers. Behind the flames were five women with whom they had lived, trained and fought - Scott for the best part of three years, Shelton for the past ten weeks. They were their friends and their comrades and both of them knew the girls would have done the same for them.

“Leave it, Private,” Hammond demanded.

Shelton looked uneasily at Scott, his resolve faltering. The fire was hot on their faces now, out of control and far too much to handle with only two extinguishers. Hammond stepped forward and laid a hand on Scott’s shoulder. “They’re gone, Scott,” he whispered sadly into his ear. “Let it go.”

The tent was raging, licked by rising flames. Black smoke poured from both ends and live ammunition cracked and whistled within. Hammond was right. No one could have survived inside. Scott dropped the cylinder in the dirt. Shelton followed.

“Where’s the rest of your unit?” Hammond asked them, his surface calm barely concealing his anguish.

“At the south end, Sergeant.”

“Get them out there and chase down Carver’s lot. I’ll let her know you’re coming.”

Scott gave a sharp salute and he and Shelton raced across the compound. The French were clearly having trouble holding the perimeter against the Hutu dissidents’ superior numbers and firepower. If H Platoon didn’t make a significant dent in the enemy’s forces, it would all be over within the hour. The comms station would be lost and any survivors would either be taken hostage or left in the jungle to rot.

They were back with the rest of their unit in under a minute. It was clear from Vallier’s face that he had a good idea what had happened. Fryer and Lewis stared at the dirt, unable to look their Corporal in the eye. All three were seething with anger and frustration. Scott said nothing of the girls’ deaths.

“Hammond’s orders: we’re to catch up with Carver in the south-east. When we get there, she’s in charge, okay?”

They nodded solemnly, disheartened but hungry for vengeance. Scott looked past them at the jungle canopy, an open maw in the soft dawn light. Five minutes in and already things were going badly.

To the east, in the Rwandan capital, Lieutenant Davidson sat nervously in front of his radio.

“Lieutenant, this is Captain Ives,” a crackling voice rang out. “I’m receiving a distress call from a Sergeant Hammond of H Platoon, stationed at comms station Alpha Seven on the western plateaux. Requesting permission to assist.”

Davidson glanced across the room at his Major. The man’s relief was palpable. The Lieutenant smiled and turned back to the radio. “What’s your position, Captain?”

“Twenty two miles nor-nor-east. We’re airborne and could be on the ground in fifteen minutes tops. We have a mixed bag here, two platoons of French, two of our lot, all ready to rumble.”

Davidson waited for the Major’s inevitable approval, then passed on his orders.

“Roger that, Captain Ives. We’ve received the signal ourselves. Situation is critical. Compound has taken severe structural damage. Last report puts casualties at thirty five percent. UN troops have been returning fire and have been authorised to use lethal force. Feel free to use the same, Captain. Get those people out of there.”

“Roger that, Lieutenant. ETA thirteen minutes. Tell Hammond to hang on in there. Over and out.”

“Fryer, how’re we doing?”

Fryer slotted the radio mike back into his backpack. “Should be with them in just a couple of minutes, Corporal.”

“Have they made contact with the enemy yet?”

“Not, yet, but they’re not far off.”

Scott took a deep breath. Next to him, Vallier was traipsing easily through the undergrowth.

“She’ll be fine, Scott. Don’t you worry.”

“Are you a mind reader now, as well as God’s gift to womankind?”

Vallier grinned and slapped him on the shoulder. “Mate, not only are you an open book, but you’re about as hard to read as Jack and fucking Jill.”

“And you’re almost as poetic as you are psychic, Vallier. Maybe I was wrong about your pulling power, after all.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I’ll try it out on one of those French birds when we get back. Nothing like a bit of heroism to get a girl going...”

Did he never stop? Even out here, marching through the jungle in search of hostile locals, he was still obsessed with getting his oats. Sure, Scott knew it was all bravado, just as he knew Vallier would never follow it through. But Scott found it hard to be as light-hearted under such intense pressure.

One shot and it could all be over. A moment of inattention was all a couple of lucky snipers would need to disable or kill all five of them.

Which made it all the more frustrating that he couldn't keep his mind on the job. Stretch was out here, too. In a unit of ten, she was theoretically far safer than him, but she was still horribly vulnerable. Not for the first time, he found himself wishing they'd never met. Without those winks and smiles on the parade ground, he would never have ended up tearing through the jungle, more worried about her than the safety of his own unit.

But in two minutes their units would merge. He'd be in a position to protect her, a position he'd never been in before. In three years, not once had he fought beside her. Never had he actually seen her in battle. The prospect left him with mixed feelings. Would it be worse than being hundreds of yards away? There was every possibility that she would prove a distraction rather than a comfort. Within minutes he would know.

Back in the capital, Major Llewelyn had reported his approval of Captain Ives' request for permission to assist Sergeant Hammond and the French. Moments later, his Colonel was on the line from London, demanding a recall.

"But Colonel, the comms station is under heavy fire. Without support, a hundred and fifty UN troops will die."

"And if Ives lands, those rebels will make mincemeat out of another four platoons. The French will blame us for authorising the mission and we'll be roasted alive."

"With all due respect, Colonel, there are twice as many French troops stationed at Alpha Seven as there are British. Our boys are in the jungle attempting to outflank the rebels and, at the moment, they're the only hope the French have."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. It was the middle of the night in London but Colonel Chambers was wide awake.

"You say Hammond's got H Platoon out in the jungle?"

"You know Sergeant Hammond, Colonel?"

"Yes, I do. Is he with them?"

"No, Colonel. Hammond is still inside the compound. The platoon lost five members in the initial attack. He sent the rest into the jungle while he co-ordinated efforts with the French."

"Any word on casualties?"

"Latest reports say the French have lost thirty nine, but are bearing up. H Platoon's down to thirty."

"Forty percent casualties, eh?"

“Yes, Colonel.”

“And where is Ives now?”

“They’re almost there, but he’s having difficulty setting down. He can’t risk landing in the compound and the thick jungle’s making it tough to find a suitable spot.”

“Tell them to get the hell out of there and call in an air strike. I’ll phone in my authority and they should be there within thirty minutes.”

“With all due respect, Colonel, half an hour could well be too long. Alpha Seven might still be around but H Platoon are failing fast. They need back-up now. Plus, an air strike will only put H Platoon in greater danger. There’s no way, in that much jungle, that an air strike will be able to tell the difference between our boys and the enemy...”

“Major, I know as well as you do what the term ‘with all due respect’ means. You seem to have missed the contradiction in your argument. If H Platoon don’t last until the air strike, there won’t be anything but hostile troops for the RAF to aim at - unless, of course, Ives is down there picking up the pieces. I’m not asking your opinion on this, Major, I’m giving you an order. Tell Ives to stand down and call in the air strike.”

Stretch’s unit had yet to engage the enemy. They’d circled anti-clockwise through the jungle and had so far sighted nothing. None of the other units had been so lucky. Apart from the casualties back at the compound, H Platoon had lost half a unit in the North and a wide eastern swoop by Treglown’s team had run into an ambush. Treglown was pinned down and, though none of her unit had been killed, several were badly injured.

So where the hell was Scott? Carver had told her what had happened back at the compound and they’d been dragging their heels for far too long now. Scott’s unit should have been here by now. She prayed to God that he wasn’t in trouble, too. If he was, Carver would be forced to leave him in favour of helping Treglown. It was simply a question of numbers. As the bigger team, Treglown’s ten would get priority over Scott’s remaining five.

She broke formation and headed for Private Gould, the radio operator.

“What’s happening with Wilson and the others?”

“They should be here by now,” Gould replied. “I don’t understand what’s keeping them.”

“Well, get on the radio and find out,” Stretch demanded, struggling to maintain her composure. Christ, why the hell had she gotten involved with him?

Gould attempted to raise the others but met nothing but static. “Fryer, you twat,” she snapped into the mouthpiece. “Where are you? If you’re fucking around with us...”

Something was wrong, Stretch knew it. He may have been a prankster out of combat, but Fryer would never have been this slack in the field.

There was a sudden burst of gunfire behind them. The trees came alive with the screeching of monkeys and the flutter of fleeing birds. Stretch snatched up her binoculars and scanned the dense foliage. Nothing. She should have expected as much. The jungle here was so thick that she could see no further than thirty yards in any direction.

Another burst, closer now. Definitely SA-80s - at least three of them. Scott, it had to be. She motioned for Gould and the nearest three privates to seek cover, then looked back at Carver. The Corporal was ordering the rest of the unit into a semi-circular defensive formation around them. She met Stretch's gaze and flicked her a knowing nod. Stretch drew little comfort from the fact that Carver knew exactly what she was thinking.

Back in Kigali, Lieutenant Davidson had problems of his own.

"Lieutenant, I'm afraid I cannot accept that order," Captain Ives' voice echoed from the radio.

Davidson swallowed and repeated himself. It was just past dawn and already the air was beginning to heat up. The slow moving ceiling fan did little but shift the early morning odours of the capital from one side of the room to the other.

"Once again," Ives responded. "I will *not* stand down."

Major Llewelyn stepped forward and snatched the delicate headset from his subordinate. With a sigh, he slid the apparatus over his head and adjusted the microphone.

"Captain Ives, this is Major Llewelyn. You are to stand down immediately and return to Gitarama. That is a direct order from London."

"Negative, Major. We can see the enemy from our current position and Alpha Seven is taking a pounding. The compound has taken serious damage and a breach is imminent. Reports from H Platoon put their casualties at between forty and fifty percent, and their effect on the rebels has been negligible. All survivors are caught behind the enemy with no real hope of making it back to the compound. Without immediate support, these people will last no more than fifteen or twenty minutes."

Llewelyn clenched and unclenched his fists frustratedly. Ives was right, but the Colonel's decision had been as final as it had been abrupt. The air strike was on its way. More allied troops on the ground was the last thing they needed.

"Captain, we have less than twenty five minutes before allied planes reduce that jungle to a tattered pulp. I cannot afford to have you and your platoons wandering around down there. And as for

taking the French along, too, we'd be risking an international incident. Captain, losing the remains of H Platoon appals me as much as it does you, but losing another two hundred men and women under friendly fire is a risk I am not prepared to take. Stand down."

"I say again, Major. I will *not* stand down. We are in a position to help these people and we will not walk away from them. We have a landing site and it is my understanding that we have twenty five minutes to make a difference."

"Captain, your bravery and that of your troops is not in doubt, here. I respect your desire to save your comrades, but I cannot allow you to jeopardise the lives of British soldiers and those of our allies on a suicide mission for the sake of a few survivors..."

"I'm sorry, Major. I'll leave the French out of it for diplomacy's sake, but the rest of us are going in. It is my appreciation of the current state of play that the risk to our troops is minimal. We have a strong position and we know the exact whereabouts of much of the enemy's troops. We have the advantage, sir, and while I sit here talking to you people are dying. You can court-martial me when I get back, but for now I ask you to keep me updated as to the timing of the air strike. We'll see if we can't get things sorted with a little more delicacy than the RAF's usual heavy-handed approach. Ives out!"

Major Llewelyn dropped the headset onto the desk. "Keep him up to date on the air strike," he barked at his subordinate. And, with no further word, he stormed from the room.

Stretch wiped the sweat from her eyes. A couple of hundred yards ahead was the sound of automatic weapons fire. To her right, Gould was on the radio. Stretch listened as she gave a hurried explanation for their delay to an increasingly desperate Treglown. Less than a mile away, Treglown's unit was heavily compromised. Three dead and four wounded, including Treglown herself. They needed bailing out, and fast.

Stretch risked a glance behind her. Her Corporal was eager for an update, clearly frustrated that her unit was inactive when the rest of their platoon was in serious strife.

"Gould, you get back to the Corporal and fill her in on Treglown's lot. Tell her I'll keep Bates, Edwards and Green here with me. We'll hold this position for as long as we can while the rest of you see what you can do for Treglown. As soon as we've dealt with whatever's going on here, we'll be right behind you."

The young private seemed uneasy with the order, but she nodded and sprang to her feet. Keeping her head low, she sprinted back to Carver and the others. Stretch signalled to her other three privates to ready themselves.

Gould was in mid-stride when Stretch saw movement in the trees ahead. She raised her weapon and prepared to strafe the undergrowth. There was a burst of gunfire and she felt her finger trembling on the trigger. Friend or foe? Friend or foe?

Bates, Edwards and Green scanned the dense green and brown foliage with their night-sights. It was light now, as light as it would get before the sun reached its zenith at midday and penetrated the thick canopy. In her peripheral vision, Stretch saw Edwards freeze. He had someone in his sights. She barked at the three of them to hold their fire.

Her own target was on its knees behind a shield of enormous palm leaves. There was a brief exchange of fire, but she couldn't tell whether her own target was involved. Friend or foe? She fought against the urge to pepper the leaves with a hail of bullets. It could so easily be Scott, she told herself, or Vallier, or one of the others.

Her target span and leapt through the palms. Her arm tensed and her finger tightened on the trigger. The man stumbled. He tripped over a curling root and slammed headfirst into the trunk of a tree.

Lewis. Stretch flicked a glance at the others, drawing their attention to him. Cover me, she mouthed.

She took a deep breath and started edging her way through the undergrowth. Her eyes scanned the foliage for signs of further movement. Lewis was on his knees by the tree. As she drew closer, he turned away from her, resting his weapon on a fallen log. He hadn't seen her, hadn't seen any of them. Where was Scott?

An angry hiss to her right snatched her back to her immediate surroundings. Inches away, a long, brown and yellow snake danced from side to side, its tongue flickering like a bright pink flame. Shit. She froze for a second, desperate to strafe it and be on her way. Was it venomous? She'd no idea. Christ, this fucking jungle. All bugs and snakes. Like Scott, she'd have given anything for an urban setting.

Cradling the SA-80 in the crook of her left elbow, she slid her right hand slowly down her leg to the bowie knife strapped to her boot. She would only get one chance.

She looked ahead at Lewis. He was firing wildly into the trees, oblivious as much to her presence as her situation. Bates, Edwards and Green were watching closely, but there was no way they could have seen the snake. Calling for help wasn't an option. The Interahamwe were almost upon them and breaking cover might prove fatal. She was on her own.

The snake swayed left and right, eyeing her up as she slowly laid the rifle on the ground. She'd yet to turn and face it. For a moment she was wracked with indecision. Maybe she should ease away from

it, move slowly to the side and edge her way to safety. No, she didn't have time. She had to get to Lewis. Just do it, Stretch, she goaded herself. Just do it.

In a single fluid movement she span and hurled the knife at the snake's lower coils, hoping to pin it to the ground. The blade flashed through the air and landed dead on target.

But the snake was no longer there.

Stretch yelped with pain as its needle-like fangs sank deep into her inner thigh. She dropped to the ground, smacking her head on a tree root. Where was the snake? Where was the snake? She felt it beneath her leg, twitching and squirming, struggling to free itself. She lashed out and caught it in her hand, her fist tight around its throat.

"You fucker," she snarled at it. The snake hissed and spat.

There was a noise above her, someone rushing through the thick scrub under a hail of automatic weapons fire. She snatched up her rifle, then sniggered deliriously at the futility of it. How could she hope to use it effectively with a snake in her other hand?

"How long now, Lieutenant?"

"Twenty minutes tops, Major."

Major Llewelyn wiped his dripping face with a sodden handkerchief. "And how's our man Ives doing?"

"Ives is on the ground and has engaged the enemy on its eastern flank. The French are sitting tight pending orders of their own, but Ives reckons they're itching to get in there."

"Any news of H Platoon?"

"Heavy losses, Major. Out of five units, the two on the enemy's western flank have suffered at least seventy percent casualties. Of the two to the south-east of the compound, one is pinned down. The other is split between assisting them and fending off a surprise attack from behind. Half of the fifth unit were killed in the compound and we lost radio contact with the others a few minutes ago."

"And the compound itself?"

"Bearing up, Major. It seems H Platoon and Ives are drawing the enemy's fire, although I doubt that's much comfort to Hammond's men. They don't seem to be doing all that much damage and they're being decimated in the process."

Llewelyn shuddered. He'd been under fire himself a number of times. The thought of a platoon being slaughtered simply to buy the French time left him nauseous.

Scott swore under his breath. This was ridiculous. Lewis and Shelton had been gone almost ten minutes. Scott's unit had only been a minute or two from Carver's at the time of the attack and one or other of the two privates should have been back with support by now.

Looking at Vallier, Scott had no idea how they'd done so well. The guerrillas had caught them by surprise, dropping Fryer with a single shot and instantly disabling their radio. Vallier had taken a hit to the leg and the four of them had dived for cover, spread out over a hundred square yards of palms and razor grass. As far as Scott could work out, they were outnumbered no more than two to one. But where positioning was concerned, the enemy definitely had the advantage. He and his team were surrounded.

It was Vallier who had spotted the sniper to the east. They'd strafed the area until they were sure the man was dead. Then, on Scott's orders, Lewis and Shelton had made a break for it under covering fire from their superiors. As far as he could tell, they'd made it. That had been several minutes ago. Since then, exchanges of fire had been limited to a few frugal volleys. The Hammies were clearly calling for reinforcements of their own.

He turned to his friend. "How's the leg?"

Vallier grimaced. "Don't reckon I'll be playing footy for a couple of weeks. The Frogs'll give you guys a pasting."

"There you go again," Scott snorted, shaking his head. "Exaggerating your own importance."

"I've got one thing to say to you, Wilson. 'Hat trick'."

"Come on, Vallier. That was back in Tetovo. You can't keep milking that one..."

"Those three," Vallier corrected him, whining as he tightened the bandage around his leg. "The Germans would have slaughtered us if I hadn't been there."

"Yeah, right, mate. Just like the Austrians did when you fluffed a penalty and got a red card for laying into their goalie."

Vallier chuckled. "Never did like that little twat. What was his name?"

They were showered with splinters as machine gun fire ripped into their protective log. "Christ," Vallier swore, "Where the hell are Lewis and Shelton?"

Only half a mile away, Lewis crouched beside Stretch, the snake dead in the dirt between them. He was returning fire while Stretch tended to the wound in her thigh.

"Your guys are almost behind them," he told her, reporting on the progress of the other three privates. "Any second now, those sneaky little shits are gonna to get the surprise of their lives."

“There a good bunch,” she smiled, though with the pain it was more of a grimace. “I taught them everything I know - except how to get bitten by snakes, of course. I kept that little gem to myself.”

Sure enough, there was a sudden burst of gunfire. A brief retort from the rebels was followed by a decisive roar from the SA-80s, then silence.

“Clear,” Edwards announced from somewhere off to their right.

“Okay, can you walk?”

Stretch nodded, though she wasn’t entirely sure. Lewis lifted her to her feet and picked up the dead snake.

“I reckon we’ve got an hour or so before you’ve really got to start worrying about this,” he reflected. Then he sliced off the top few inches of the snake and slipped the segment into his pocket. “We’d better get going.”

He led the way back through the jungle towards the site of the original ambush. The occasional rattle of an SA-80 assured them that at least one of their friends was alive.

Less than two hundred yards from Scott and Vallier’s position, Stretch gestured for Bates and Green to circle the position and surrounding rebels in a clockwise direction. Edwards and Lewis she took with her, heading anticlockwise. In under a minute they’d found their first target. A lone gunman was perched in the lower fronds of a huge palm tree, focusing on Scott and Vallier’s position.

“Mine,” Lewis whispered.

He dropped to one knee and fixed the man in his sights. The unwitting rebel was, himself, preparing to fire. A single loud ‘pop’ from Lewis’ rifle and enemy soldier fell twitching to the jungle floor. Edwards rushed over make certain he was dead.

They worked their way round, soon uncovering a second man, quivering in the undergrowth. The man surrendered immediately, jabbering unintelligibly at them and begging for mercy. Lewis thrust the muzzle of his gun in the rebel’s face, raising an index finger to his lips in a call for silence.

“Great,” Edwards groaned. “So what do we do with this bloke while we’re fighting for our lives against his mates?”

Stretch’s response was drowned out by the rattling of a foreign machine gun at very close range. All four of them dropped to their haunches. Stretch gasped at the pain in her thigh. The African’s eyes were wide with fear.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Stretch asked her friend. Lewis shrugged and scanned the tree tops. On the far side of the ambush site, a second volley sounded. Two SA-80s replied. So, Bates and Green were still alive, then, even if they’d stumbled across trouble of their own. Christ, she hated crawling around on her belly in the jungle.

“Sounds like at least one of the boys made it, then,” Vallier grinned as the SA-80s rang out on either side of them.

Scott could tell he was fading fast. The bandage on his leg was thick with blood and his face was a telling grey. Scott had to keep his friend going until things were settled enough to give him more than preliminary first aid.

“You just hang in there, Casanova. Lewis, Shelton and Stretch’s lot’ll have those bastards running for their lives in no time.”

Listening to the sounds of battle, Scott prayed he sounded more confident than he felt. There should have been twice as many British guns out there. Carver’s ten-strong unit should have had the half dozen rebels surrounded.

Unless something had gone seriously wrong.

He glanced at Vallier’s bleeding leg and pictured Stretch with a similar wound, lying in some thicket somewhere, surrounded by enemy snipers. Had his and Vallier’s call for help been Carver’s unit’s undoing? Christ, he’d been worrying about Stretch since they’d left the compound. Now he’d placed her in even greater danger. And, to make matters worse, it could well have been his own lack of attention that had facilitated the ambush in the first place.

It was while he tortured himself with these thoughts that his eye caught a flash of gun metal in the bows of a tree to his right. Vallier saw it, too, and raised his weapon. Scott placed a hand on the barrel and shook his head. He was in far better shape. He would take the shot. If he made a mess of it, it could be their last.

A third blaze from above and Stretch was no closer to spotting the sniper. Their Hammie prisoner was fidgeting beside her and she was sure he was about to bolt. Edwards had a tight grip on the man’s arm and Lewis was firing randomly into the trees. Some rescue this was.

Suddenly, from the centre of the ambush site, two single shots rang out. Above them, about fifteen yards to the right, a mass of palm fronds shook violently. There was a third shot and a lifeless body fell thirty feet to the ground.

Lewis rose tentatively to his feet. He crept through the undergrowth to the fallen rebel. “Very dead,” he reported when he reached him. “That’s the last time I take the piss out of Wilson for bringing his Browning.”

Stretch smiled. So Scott was still alive. Vallier would have stuck with his own semi-automatic - unless, of course, he’d run out of ammo.

They continued to circle the site. By halfway they'd found nothing, but gunfire to the south told them Bates and Green were still in difficulty.

"Edwards, I'll stay here with him. You and Lewis see if you can take care of the other guys from behind. Signal the all-clear when you're ready and we'll meet in the middle."

Edwards nodded and Stretch took hold of the African's arm. The man's biceps were thick and hard. God, she hoped he didn't try anything. She'd been well-trained and, a couple of hours ago, she'd have been more than a match for him. But with a throbbing snakebite she wasn't keen on a confrontation. As Edwards and Lewis disappeared into the jungle, she gestured for the man to be seated. He obeyed, somewhat reluctantly, and she shuffled away from him, training the rifle on his chest.

"Lewis! Shelton! Is that you out there?"

No reply, only the oscillating staccato of machine-guns to their left. To their right was silence. Scott looked across at his friend. Vallier was having trouble keeping his eyes open, though he was doing his best to convince Scott otherwise. A change of bandage had done little to disguise the fact that, without proper medical attention, he didn't have long to live. Scott growled with frustration. The wound itself hadn't been serious. He'd even laughed along with Vallier at first, assuring him that the walking wounded would receive far more attention from the nurses than conquering heroes when they eventually made it back to the compound. But for Vallier, 'eventually' simply wasn't soon enough.

Vallier's lewd references to French nursing practices had long since ended. It had been a while now since the Lance Corporal had managed more than monosyllabic responses to Scott's efforts to keep him awake. Whoever was out there, whether it was Carver's unit or someone else, they'd better get things under control or Vallier simply wouldn't make it.

That was the thing, though, wasn't it? Where would he make it to? Without Fryer's radio, Scott had no idea how the French were faring against the Hammies' main onslaught. There might already be nowhere for Vallier to go. Even now, the compound's equivalent of a regimental aid post might well lay in ruins. And if the French were bearing up, how could he and Vallier make it back through the indefinable enemy line?

Scott's voice brought Stretch a sense of relief. But it scared her, too. She could tell from its tone that something was wrong. She could sense his desperation. He was afraid, not of the rebels or of the rattling machine guns only a hundred yards away, but of death itself. She'd seen that same fear in the eyes of the captive African only minutes before. Scott's self-control was a far cry from the rebel's

unbridled panic, but his emotions would be no less intense. A sane soldier never conquered fear, he merely held it in check.

More than anything, she wanted to call out to him, to reassure him that in a few minutes it would all be over. But she couldn't. She was alone out here, guarding an enemy prisoner. A few words of reassurance might be all that was needed to draw a wandering sniper's attention. Wounded or not, Scott would have to wait.

She did her best to remain focused on the African's eyes. The man was weeping quietly. The Interahamwe propaganda machine was a powerful one and he'd be terrified of what would happen to him as a prisoner of the UN. She'd heard the rumours, the UN were worse than the Tutsis, and Alpha Seven and places like it had been dubbed as Hutu death camps by the exiled rebel junta.

His fear made him dangerous. At any moment, he might decide he would rather die than be taken to the compound. If he did, she'd see it in his eyes. And, weakened by her injuries, she'd be forced to kill him in order to protect herself.

But until that moment came, if it came, she would have to sit there, staring into those broken, dark brown eyes, and listening to the gunfire around them. They were the eyes of a victim. She'd risked her life to protect hundreds of people with that same haunted expression, but this one she might have to kill. She knew he'd do the same to her, given half a chance, and she wouldn't hesitate to respond if she needed to. But she'd still have to live with the fact that she'd killed an unarmed man.

"Give me some good news, Davidson."

The Lieutenant breathed shallowly into the palm of his hand, the radio buzzing in one ear, Kigali early morning traffic in the other. The best news he had was that the air strike was five minutes from Alpha Seven. Ives and his two platoons were still on the ground and H Platoon was in tatters. Casualties within Alpha Seven itself had exceeded fifty percent but the rebels' main force was scattered. Ives was convinced he had things under control, but the French military had agreed to the air strike.

Llewelyn was losing patience. "Lieutenant, what the hell's going on down there?"

"Air strike within five minutes, Major." He reeled off the various statistics, then paused for a moment before adding a last subjective comment. "Ives seems to think he's got the edge on them, sir."

The Major let out a deep sigh and walked to the window. Out in the street, everything was pretty much as normal. The sun had risen on an average Sunday morning in Kigali. Below him, shaded by the eucalyptus trees and blue flowering branches of fragrant jacarandas, hawkers touted their wares in a

mixture of French and Kinyarwanda. Crippled beggars hobbled through the streets, dodging buffalo and nagging shoppers for a handful of worthless Rwandaise francs. In a couple of hours, the church bells would chime and the city's multi-faithed Christians would make their way to their respective places of worship, blissfully unaware of the blood shed on their behalf.

Were they worth it? Were the lives of these bickering people really worth the lives of the thirty or more young British soldiers who had already died that morning? Were they worth the seventy five French casualties besieged inside Alpha Seven, in the middle of some stinking jungle six thousand miles from home? Should the UN have been there in the first place, meddling in the affairs of a bunch of Africans who'd done nothing but squabble in the decades since Belgium had granted them independence? More pressingly, were the politics of Rwanda really worth more than the remaining members of H Platoon, destined to die under a hail of allied missiles in less than five minutes time?

He turned away from the window and faced the exhausted eyes of his Lieutenant. Whether or not the air strike was really necessary, he had his orders and the French were already committed. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Tell Captain Ives to get his men the hell out of there," he said begrudgingly.

Between the five uninjured soldiers and their captive, it didn't take long to make stretchers for the wounded. Within a few minutes they were trudging their way back to the compound, the distant sounds of battle a grim reminder that the wisdom of heading for the compound was still in doubt.

Bates led the way, slashing at the jungle with his machete. Lewis and Green carried Vallier. Neither was as tall as Scott, but both were far stronger, being almost as well built as Vallier himself. Scott and the African carried Stretch. Lewis had quietly expressed his concern over the snakebite. It was on his recommendation that Scott had bound the wound and immobilised her legs. Machine-gun in hand, Edwards brought up the rear.

Vallier had been unconscious for quite some time. The wound had finally begun to clot, but Scott was almost certain that the man would be dead on arrival. He'd no idea how much blood his friend had lost, but he'd seen this deathly pallor before - never on a member of his platoon, but on plenty of fatally wounded refugees.

Stretch was in far better condition. She was still chatting perfectly lucidly with Scott as he and the African bore her makeshift litter through the jungle. Nevertheless, Lewis had confided in him that the snake was far more venomous than she knew. He still had its remains in his pocket, but neither was sure there'd be antivenin back at the compound. The comms station's medical tent had been well-

stocked before the attack, but they wouldn't know if was anything left of the structure until they arrived.

Scott swore with frustration. Without Fryer and his radio they were deaf, dumb and blind. They had no way to call for help, and they had no idea how Carver's or Treglown's units were faring further east. Neither could they contact Alpha Seven. For all they knew, they could be racing into occupied territory.

"Don't worry, Scott," Stretch called back to him, her head raised at the other end of the litter. "Vallier's going to make it. It'd take more than bullet in the leg to shut *him* up."

Scott tried to smile. Her own face had lost much of its colour in the past few minutes.

"And don't you worry about me," she added, reading him perfectly. "There'll be plenty of time to get me back to Kigali if there's no antivenin left at the compound."

"I'm just finding it a bit hard to get my head around the mess they've made of my unit, that's all."

"Scott, it's not just *your* unit that's taken a battering. Last thing I heard, Treglown was in pretty serious strife, too."

"I bet they're taking a few with them, though. I lost five before we even left the compound. And in the last half an hour or so, I've lost Fryer *and* Shelton. Now, Vallier's bleeding to death and what have we got to show for it all? Two dead snipers. Bloody marvellous."

"One of those snipers nearly killed three of *us*," she reminded him. "The other had the four of you pinned down with no hope of rescue. What happened back at the compound was hardly your fault - you weren't even there. Fryer died in an ambush and Shelton died trying to find help. There's nothing you could have done to prevent any of it."

Scott remembered how distracted he'd been in the moments before the ambush. If only he'd been paying more attention...

His attempt to explain this to her was drowned out by the roar of two RAF Tornados passing overhead. The tops of the highest palm trees thrashed back and forth in the jet stream. Scott shook his head in joyous disbelief. At last, the cavalry had arrived.

"Yeah, baby!" Lewis shouted excitedly up front, punching the air. "Time for the RAF boys to give those sneaky little shits a taste of their own medicine."

Bates and Green joined in. Scott could see the African shaking with fear ahead of him. The man's knuckles were white where he gripped the gnarled frame of Stretch's litter. Scott looked over his shoulder at Edwards.

"Watch him," he told the grim-faced Private. "I reckon he's thinking of doing a runner."

Edwards nodded and narrowed his eyes on the prisoner.

Lewis was still leading the jubilations when the first missile struck the ground only yards away. Scott was blinded by the explosion. He dropped to his knees, trying in vain to keep the stretcher from falling from his grasp. Through the ringing in his ears, he could barely make out the screams up ahead.

“The African!” he shouted. “Get the fucking African.”

A brief burst of fire only three or four yards ahead of him. Green was shouting incoherently at the prisoner. Scott’s eyes were burning. What the fuck was going on?

Someone - Edwards? - rushed past him from behind. There was some sort of commotion, angry words between two of his men. “Edwards? Lewis? What the hell’s going on?” he shouted.

“Scott?” Stretch was talking to him. He could feel the wooden poles of the stretcher on the ground in front of him.

“Stretch? I can’t see. What’s going on?”

“Bates and Lewis are down. The African tried to make a run for it and Green lost the plot - started beating the crap out of him. Edwards had to haul him off and he’s trying to calm him down.”

“What about Bates and Lewis?” he asked her. “And Vallier?”

“I can’t see much, either, Scott. Edwards! Status report.”

There was a pause, then Edwards’ voice up ahead. “Bad. Bates is gone. Lewis is in a pretty bad way. I think it missed Vallier, but I can’t get a pulse from him. I think he’s gone, too, sir.”

Stretch was quiet for a moment before she spoke. “What about Green?”

“Green’s watching the African. No serious injuries to either of them.”

“And you?” she asked him.

“Not a scratch.”

Stretch was talking to Scott now, asking him what they should do.

“Are we sure Vallier’s dead?” he called out to Edwards.

“Positive, Corporal,” the Private replied.

“Put Lewis on Vallier’s stretcher,” Scott told him. “You and Green carry him. Send the African over here to help me with Stretch.”

“But, Scott, you can’t see,” Stretch reminded him.

Scott rubbed his eyes. The blindness wasn’t permanent. In a few minutes he’d be back to normal. Did they have that long?

“I’ll be all right. Until then, we’ll just have to trust the African to lead me in the right direction. I’m not going to sit here while the RAF carpet bomb the whole area. Fucking typical. All that high precision equipment and they’ve taken out three of their own men. God, I wish we had a radio.”

Scott lifted the stretcher when he felt the African take hold of the other end. Ignoring the flies and mosquitoes buzzing around his head, he fought to maintain his balance as they marched slowly through the undergrowth. Now and then, a root or vine snagged the toes of his jackboots, almost causing him to fall. High steps, he reminded himself. Pick those feet *up*.

In the distance, the rebels were taking a pounding. The howl of jet engines tore through the sky above. Scott could smell the jungle burning.

“How far now?” he called out.

“At this pace, another fifteen minutes or so,” Edwards called back. “I’m taking us round the long way. In the state we’re in, we can’t risk running into wandering rebels.”

They walked for another few minutes, progress painfully slow. Scott thought of the poison running through Stretch’s veins. She hadn’t spoken since they’d left Vallier and Bates at the site of the explosion. He’d already lost Vallier to a supposedly minor wound. Was a simple snake bite now going to rob him of Stretch? God, this *fucking* jungle. If they’d been anywhere else, they’d have been able to signal the RAF. Here they were just another unknown, anonymous and unidentifiable. But, Christ, the RAF should be bombing the whole fucking area. Surely they knew there were allied troops around.

Stretch could feel the poison coursing through her. Her limbs were aching and she was no longer strong enough to wipe the sweat from her face. A host of flies hovered up the salt from her lips and the tears from the whites of her eyes. God, she was hot. The heat of the jungle seemed to smother her, even up here on the plateau. For the first time that day, she was seriously afraid she wouldn’t make it.

Scott’s vision was clearing. As she craned her neck to look at him, she could see him beginning to focus. It wouldn’t be long now. Then they could up the pace a bit, maybe beat Edwards’ estimate of another eight minutes to the compound.

Lewis should have told her how venomous the snake really was. He’d known, she was sure of it. After Vallier, Lewis was their resident expert on local wildlife. He’d told Scott, and Stretch had been able to read her lover’s concern from the moment they’d met each other’s eyes at the site of the ambush. Scott, of course, had said nothing. He’d called it a ‘precaution’ when he’d ordered the others to make a litter and had splinted the injured leg.

His young face looked older now, even without its coating of jungle dirt. In all their time in the Army, neither had seen a close friend die. Today they’d lost two, and Lewis would be lucky to escape with even one of his legs intact. Scott would be taking this even worse than Stretch. As a child, he’d reacted to the loss of his parents by withdrawing. Only in the Army had he opened up - far more so

than she had. He had allowed himself to care for those around him, and he and Vallier especially had become inseparable. In the past hour, he had paid dearly for the softening of his heart.

“We’re crossing a shallow river,” Edwards warned them. “Corporal, I recommend that you and the African stay on this side. Green and I’ll drop Lewis on the other side, then we’ll come back over. The prisoner and I’ll take Stretch. Green can guide you across the river.”

Stretch could see that Scott was about to object, that he was going to insist that his eyesight was improving and that he and the African would be perfectly capable of carrying the litter themselves.

“Just do as he says, Scott,” she urged him.

He nodded and called forward his approval. Edwards and Green splashed across the river, laid Lewis on the ground, and returned. Edwards’ face appeared above her, smiling grimly. “How’s it going, Stretch? Keeping your shit together?”

She nodded, barely dislodging the flies. If only she had the energy to speak. She’d have joked with him, come up with some witty response to his question in an effort to raise morale. As it was, she pulled back her lips in what must have seemed a poor imitation of a grin.

Edwards took hold of Scott’s end of the stretcher and nodded at the African to lead the way. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Green glaring at the captured rebel as they made their way into the shallow waters of the river. Such hatred, such a desperate desire to kill.

Scott was reluctant to hand the stretcher over. His vision had begun to clear and the added delay concerned him. Still, they couldn’t afford to have him trip on the mud and rocks of the river bed. Even the slightest of sprains would slow them considerably - perhaps fatally.

He watched Edwards and the African as they passed Green on the river bank and edged their way into the thigh deep water. Suddenly, what he’d assumed at first to be raging tinnitus from the explosion became the howl of twin jets overhead. Green’s hateful eyes widened at the double scream of a pair of air-to-surface missiles lancing through the trees.

The river bank exploded in a shower of mud, rock and boiling water. A section of jungle erupted in a riot of reds and greens. Edwards and Green died where they stood, reduced to a mass of tattered flesh and cloth hurling through the air. Stretch and her litter were thrown across the river, crashing into the dense scrub at the water’s edge. The African vanished in a cloud of steam and smoke.

Scott coughed and vomited as he dragged himself to his knees. His legs were tangled in thick, barbed vines. His hands were bleeding and scorched. But his vision was almost clear now. Ignoring the pain in his calves, he wrenched himself free of the thorny undergrowth and rose weakly to his feet.

“Stretch! Stretch!” He raced past the bloody remains of Edwards and Green and crashed into the river. Slipping and sliding his way across, he hauled himself onto the opposite bank. A yard or two away he found Stretch. The African was kneeling beside her, his eyes filled with sadness as he watched Scott hobble towards him.

Stretch lay like a discarded scarecrow in the dirt, the litter on top of her, her arms and legs twisted beneath and her head twisted at an impossible angle. Scott searched desperately for a pulse, knowing there’d be none. The African watched in silence, his head bowed, his hands clasped loosely in his lap.

Scott felt the tears welling in his eyes. He closed them tight, desperate to undo the scene before him. But where he sought darkness, he found the winks and smiles of the parade ground and the beauty of her naked body as they lay laughing in the back of the Apache. And then just her face - filled with relief at the site of the ambush; burning with fever at the edge of the river.

The African was still there when he opened his eyes, as silent and still as before. The man’s face spoke of nothing but sympathy. No hatred, no fear, only pain. And only minutes before they’d been the deadliest of enemies.

Scott dropped his rifle and tugged at the litter. The African helped him turn it over. Rightside up, Stretch’s body lolled beneath them, hideously broken. Scott closed her dark brown eyes and arranged her head and limbs in a mockery of sleep. He leaned forward and placed a light kiss between her eyebrows. Her skin was still feverishly hot. He blinked the tears from his eyes and they ran freely across his cheeks.

The African was on his feet, walking around to Scott’s side of the stretcher. Scott flinched as he felt the man’s hand on his shoulder. For the first time, he caught his scent on the still, jungle air and it reminded him of Vallier. Vallier, dead in the undergrowth somewhere to the east. Fryer, lying where he’d fallen, under a hastily made shroud of enormous palm leaves. Stretch, killed by her own countrymen and left to rot, thousands of miles from home. And then it dawned on him. Lewis. Where the hell was Lewis?