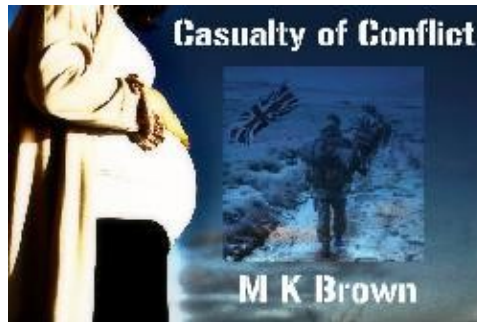


# Casualty of Conflict

By : **M K Brown**

In 1982 the Falkland Islands were invaded by Argentinian forces. Chris is with the 2PARA contingent sent as part of the task force to take back the islands for the British. His wife, Shona, is heavily pregnant and awaits his return, her loneliness and fear for her husband's safety is crushing her. An emotional story following his part in the attack on Goose Green and her day-to-day life as a serving soldier's wife.



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# Chapter 1: The Landings

## Blue Beach (San Carlos Bay), Falkland Islands, 21st May 1982

"Incoming!" The distant voice yelled as the roar of the super-sonic engine grew louder and louder, building to an ear-rupturing crescendo as it passed overhead. The explosion shook the area and the screams of the injured could be heard even from a distance.

Looking around Chris could tell - with a slight hint of morbid amusement - which ones were newer recruits and which were the old hands. He fixed his gaze on one lad in particular, he wasn't even trying to hide the extreme terror like the others, couldn't be much older than 17, no more than a boy and clearly way out of his depth.

Everyone knew it was coming of course, his mind's eye brought him back to that day, 2nd April, the day when he heard the Argentinean forces had landed on the Falklands. It was all over the news that day and Chris' Paratrooper unit had been amongst all those recalled from leave.

The Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, had announced that they were going to take back a British Overseas Territory, although there was no formal declaration of war.

Sergeant Chris McCall smiled to himself as he remembered the pride swelling during that speech made by the prime minister to the task force, she spoke about the glory, honour and proud history of the British armed forces - *no pressure* - also the duty of Britain to protect her borders and subjects.

Yet, here he was stuck in a glorified crater with his unit, trying, like everyone else in the vicinity, to avoid being blown up. No honour and no glory here, just a few terrified boys and a spine of hardcore veterans that kept everything ticking over and everyone moving forward. The only major difference between the two groups being how high they jumped whenever another bomb hit its nearby target; and the Argentinean aircraft were hammering the ships with an unexpected frightening accuracy.

He only just managed to suppress the urge to laugh out loud at the mental picture of the men jumping about two metres off the ground at the moment of explosion from the bombs.

"Sergeant McCall!" A voice suddenly broke into his thoughts.

"Sir?" He spluttered coming out of his daydream and noticing the Major beckoning him towards the other side of the hole.

In a few moments he was at the Major's side ready for his instructions, like all British soldiers he never saluted an officer when under enemy fire, this drummed into him during training and he smirked to himself as his train of thought brought him back to what his instructor had said during basic.

*"Ladies - there are two fundamental rules to surviving on a battlefield," he continued "Number One - Do not try to catch the bullets; they're very, very dangerous..." Despite the chuckles from the crowd he had held his habitual scowl and continued, ever the consummate professional British soldier. "Number Two - Never, I repeat never salute an officer on the front line, you may as well stick a 'shoot me' sign on his fuckin' forehead and be done with it, anyone incapable of grasping that will have their bollocks whipped 'til they sing soprano." Most of his training mates had laughed at that comment but their expressions dropped when they saw the instructors face.*

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*He wasn't kidding.*

A shake of his shoulder brought him back to the present. The Major was waiting a few moments for Chris to arrive back on earth. Major Harkness knew Chris was a bit of a daydreamer but accepted it, his soldiering skills more than made up for his occasional short attention span.

"Sorry Sir!" Chris said drifting back to reality.

"Nice daydream Sergeant?" He asked rhetorically. "I want you to go round the men and find out what ordinance they're low on, check their rations and other gear. Once you're done take a few guys down to the caches and re-supply the squad."

"Yes Sir!" Chris said whilst turning away; glad to finally have something to do instead of sitting doing fuck all for hours on end, which chafed even this daydreamer's arse.

He headed off to his pack to find something to record all the requirements and then set about checking and double-checking what the men needed. Then, picking two of the new arrivals, including the terrified young lad he had been watching earlier; mainly in an attempt to relieve some of the young mans anxiousness by keeping him busy. They set off to get the supplies.

Chris finished a few hours later and was heading back to his unit with the two lads who had helped ferry the stuff up to their recipients. They were idly chatting away about home; the girls they claimed they'd had and their families with Chris just out in front. His seclusion wasn't an attempt to snub the two young men; it was more to protect himself, the last thing he needed was to get to know, even like these lads just to see them cut down by a burst of fire or an explosion, days or even hours later.

This is a war.

## Chapter 2: The Wife

**Somewhere in the United Kingdom, (Early Morning) 22nd May 1982**

She lay on her back staring at the ceiling; the tear tracks down her cheeks still shining in the curtain-filtered streetlight. She sighed. Rolling onto her side with more than a little difficulty, the bulge of her stomach was huge now, needing sleep but unable to close her eyes for long, she just stared - blankly. Avoiding any conscious thought. Imagining herself running from unseen horrors, on and on she fled; looking back it always seemed to be gaining on her.

No escape.

The nightmare always caught her in the end. That's when the tears would come again. Feeling so alone, so helpless, abandoned. The news said the landings had begun. There were no pictures of course, 3 weeks delay they said. The tabloids were still talking about that bloody ship - the one that had been sunk by a British submarine or something.

They're calling it bomb alley. The planes pop up from nowhere and hit the ships.

*Bastards!*

Her thoughts played randomly as she lay there.

*"I'm sorry!" Chris had said.*

*"What for?" She had answered.*

*"My mother, she says she's going to visit you everyday whilst I'm away." He confessed.*

*She laughed.*

He always could make her laugh from the first day they had met. Her memories came flooding back, she shut her eyes to make the pictures come clearer in her mind.

*The drunken man staggered and waddled, he burped and squinted - trying to focus - at everyone in the pub, eyes eventually resting on Shona.*

*She looked fantastic that night, her long brown hair with the natural curl at the end, the perfect frame for her elegant yet compact facial features, the sparkling eyes giving just the slightest hint of her shrewd intelligence. Long soft legs highlighted subtly by her knee length skirt.*

*The drunk man - now fixated on her - approached the table. "Scuse me darlin', you l-l-look stunnin'. Fancy a shag?"*

*"No thanks." She answered politely.*

*"Fuckin' hard nosed bitch." The drunken man lumbered toward her with fists clenched - clearly not one for rejection - Shona stood and stared at him despite the fear gripping her stomach.*

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*Concentrating so much on keeping the alarm from her face she didn't notice the other man approaching until he stepped into her line of sight.*

*"Come on mate, let's get you another drink."*

*"An' who th' fuck ur you?" The drunk radiated hostility.*

*The other man just smiled and darted his head forward stopping just short of a head butt to stare directly at the bloodshot eyes of the other.*

*"Someone you definitely don't want to fuck with. Now, you either accept the drink and calm down or you piss off out the door. Those are your only options."*

*The inebriated man gulped and looked like he was going to reply but thought better of it. He turned and staggered for the door. Shona watching him leave as she sighed in relief.*

*"Next time a drunk asks for a shag, jus' say yes. Saves me hassle." He grinned at her.*

*Realising the man was talking to her she laughed.*

*"I'm Chris." He thrust out his hand and she shook it.*

*"I'm Shona. Thank you for that. Can I get you a drink - as reward?"*

*"Yeah why not."*

*Lying on her bed she giggled tearfully as she remembered that night.*

*He left next day for a tour of duty in Northern Ireland but they kept in touch. For six months she worried about him and wrote to him often.*

*Who would be a soldier's wife? She asked herself, smiling sadly.*

## Chapter 3: The Assault Begins

It seemed as if the little house was crammed with thousands of men, two Para had commandeered the house and as many men as could squeeze a place inside were using it to lay low and keep dry. After days in the South Atlantic climate they were all scrabbling for as much of the little warmth as possible before they began the assault on the Darwin Parks peninsula.

Chris shivered as he remembered the previous week's march through boggy, waterlogged terrain, such shitty conditions to move across land in, one guy had even fallen in up to his neck; he survived but the incident added to the miserable atmosphere over the unit.

He looked round the room he was squished into with what looked like a hundred others, fingers tingling as they warmed up unbearably slowly. He began opening and closing them in an attempt to speed up the painful, slow and ultimately pointless process by increasing the blood flow.

"Sergeant!" Hearing a whisper and feeling the slight nudge he turned toward the source and found the young Private - Cole - grinning widely.

"What you so fuckin' chuffed about?"

"Lookâ !" the lad produced a camping stove from the cupboard he'd been rummaging through, looking extremely pleased with himself.

"Nice one!" Chris nodded approvingly. "Now get some water on the boil for a brew."

The teen set to work getting set-up and clearing a space so he didn't burn the house down.

"I hope there's enough for everyone, Sergeant." The voice of the Major gently carried over the ambient chatter.

*Never misses a trick, does he? Chris smiled to himself.*

"Bit short on water, Sir. Give the lad some more and he'll do it." Cole looked a little put out by being "volunteered" as the tea lady but quickly shrugged it off, it's the army, no use complaining.

The Major nodded and Chris flashed a smile although with the mud and cam-paint it looked more of a grimace.

*"Right boys, we'll do this troop-by-troop, pass your canteens down and they'll boil the water for you. Everyone will get some eventually so no stealin' ya tealeafin' bastards!"*

The time dragged by as canteens of cold and hot water passed through Private Cole and Sergeant McCall's hands, it was back and forth tedious and slow work but at least their hands warmed up.

All too soon the murmurs grew as the orders to move out filtered their way through the house.

Automatically Chris checked his L1A1 rifle; clicking the safety off then back on to ensure it wasn't stiff; releasing and slamming the magazine back in place to ensure it was secure and pulling back the chamber cover to ensure the first round had been loaded in to the firing chamber.

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"Check your shit before you even consider shiftin'!" He yelled to his platoon above the activity and voices.

A chorus of metallic thuds and clicks followed as they all performed the basic pre-battle routine.

Moments later a shout and the rhythmic rumbling of boots on the floorboards signalled the house was clearing room by room.

Tension filled the air as fear tried to assert its presence in everyone's mind. Chris' breath caught in his throat more than once as he fought to keep his fear from freezing his limbs, willpower slowly but surely overpowering the gut-wrenching dread of so many unknown future possibilities.

Eventually the fear subsided, not completely as the butterflies had moved from his stomach to somewhere behind his lungs, but he had regained control over his actions again.

At length all platoons were formed up outside and the plans were relayed and discussed with each individual unit. All going well they'd have Goose Green "By breakfast."

Flashes off to the east drew Chris' gaze, as he watched there were more and more explosions, the sounds drifting to them on the South Atlantic winds as Her Majesty's Frigate HMS Arrow shelled the Argentine positions along the Isthmus 2 PARA were preparing to attack.

\*\*\*\*\*

Just over an hour later Chris and his platoon crouched waiting and fretting on the back slope of a small mound, listening to the continuing bombardment of the Argentine positions. All praying that they move out sooner rather than later, each worried that their fear will turn them to stone if they stooped there too long.

Flicking the light of his watch on, Sergeant McCall checked the time, staring at the face for a few moments before his mind registered it - 0228. Those of the men close enough to others whispered nervously as they waited for the inevitable order to attack.

*Please surrender you idiots, don't make me kill you,* he pleaded silently while glancing at the dark sky. The shelling from HMS Arrow continued, as it had for over an hour already, in an attempt to destroy - or at least disrupt - the enemy positions up on Darwin Parks, all so 2PARA could sweep through and take Goose Green.

Tactically speaking Goose Green was not important in the counter-invasion target to liberate the capital of the islands - Port Stanley - however due to the large contingent of Argentine forces stationed there it was too dangerous to ignore. So Chris' unit was among those tasked with attacking the well-prepared forces as the Marines, Scots and Welsh Guards prepared to fight their way toward Stanley.

At 0229 or thereabouts the shelling began to slow - the gaps between impacts becoming clearly longer before fizzling out completely.

*"Right dickheads move it!"* the bodiless voice boomed from out the pitch-black night.

*"You heard 'em guys, get yer arses in gear,"* Chris yelled, more to motivate himself than his men.

Another silence-shattering cacophony of clicks as they all checked their weapons. He smiled; they were all doing their part to ensure there was no "dead-man's click" in the midst of battle. The rifle could still jam - God forbid - but their actions were ensuring that it didn't happen through negligence in the worst possible moment.



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The platoon fanned-out and began to move forward in loose, staggered lines; easily in position to offer fire support if any other troop became pinned down.

As he led the way towards their objective - the first of the heavy machine gun emplacements - Chris noticed the ground was slowly rising. Fear tried to assert itself in his body and only succeeded in triggering adrenalin to explode in to his veins in response. The ground continued to rise and all too soon the summit loomed ahead. They were slowly coming into the scything firing-arcs of the enemy's heavy infantry weapons.

Shaking his head and rubbing his eyes briefly Chris had to exert a serious effort to block the images of impending death from his mind. He held his breath in the deathly silence; afraid it would give their position away. The telltale "thunk-thunk-thunk" from the mortar unit working tirelessly behind them put Sergeant McCall a little more at ease as he realised the platoon and he were not alone.

"Thank you." He whispered to the darkness towards where he guessed the unseen spotter would be located calling back grid co-ordinates.

A sudden burst of tracer sent Chris sprawling flat on the soggy ground in reaction. The water seeping in to his DPM's as he realised the enemy were aiming for the out of range mortars.

Rising slowly to his feet Chris gave the hand signal to stand up. Gradually getting his breathing and shaking body under control, he moved on - his men following behind. Still no incoming fire directed at them, only the occasional flash of tracer as some jumpy conscript reacted to gunfire elsewhere.

Slowing and eventually stopping as he came to the last point where they could remain hidden. Chris signalled for his under-officers to join him and the Corporals quickly gathered round him.

Through whispers and hand gestures they eventually came to an agreement on how to proceed and everyone was dismissed to rejoin their individual troop and relay the plan.

What seemed like an eternity passed as Chris crept into position, to wait for the torch flash that would indicate the flanking units were ready to go. The nest they were to assault had three heavy machine guns manned by two men each. Also entrenched were riflemen to offer small arms support - these were un-numbered but estimated at around 30-50 men either on the hill or within firing range.

The plan itself was simple; three groups from three directions. The positions of attack were far enough apart to panic the enemy but not so far as to make friendly fire any more than a slight-possibility.

Going through the plan over and over, thinking out all the contingencies and possible fuck-ups he almost missed the flash. Luckily a second flash was to follow a minute later, that one he saw for sure. Shielding the light from the view of any alert - or jumpy - sentry above, he flashed the pre-determined signal for the other assault-team to start countdown to the attack. Chris began to count.

"1â 2â 3â 4â 5â 6â 7â 8â 9â 10â !" Right on cue muzzle flash and shouting erupted from the left as the first group led off the assault.

"11â 12â 13â 14â !" More shouting and firing - this time from round to his right - indicated the second assault team had gone, a little early but that was no matter. "15â 16â 17â 18â 19â 20!" Chris sprung to his feet roaring incoherently but so loud he almost startled himself before being drowned out by the lung-bursting growls from the men behind as the third and final phase of the attack rolled into play.

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The men on the hill were giving ground but still fighting hard against the first two assault-teams. The roaring echoing round the hill heralded the arrival of the third team. The enemy's will to fight broke and they surrendered.

Those who weren't dead, wounded or paralyzed with fear threw down their weapons rather than face a third wave of the professional soldiers. Chris drew in a deep breath to fill his lungs and slowly exhaled, trying his best to control the thumping in his chest.

Looking around he could see his men were in good spirits, the first action had gone well.

*"Casualties? Prisoners?" he yelled, as his mind began to clear. "Signaller? Get on to HQ for the sitrep... the rest of you, secure the area!"*

There was no direct acknowledgement to his order, just a flurry of movement and shouting coming from the Corporals as they handed out assignments to their troops. Minutes passed as Chris watched chaos forming back in to an organised unit.

"Sergeant?"

"Yes, Corporal?" He replied distractedly whilst watching the signaller setting up the radio.

"Four enemy dead; four injured; thirty-five prisoners. Ours..." The Corporal paused as he finished the final calculation. "Zero killed; 5 injured but they are all minor and one complete twat!" Chris' head shot round and he gave the young man a searching look.

"The idiot tripped on a fuckin' sandbag 3 minutes ago and looks to have dislocated his knee in the process. He wasn't looking where he was goin'. The medic has told him it's done in 'n'll need to come off. " The look on the young man's face at the time of the news came back in to his mind and caused the Corporal to laugh.

Suppressing his own smile, Chris shook his head. "There's always one! Thank you Corporal, dismissed."

Turning back to the signaller as the radio crackled to life. Rubbing and blowing into his hands, he waited for news and further orders.

"..Yes Sir! He's here. Wait one..." The young communications soldier turned to Chris indicating he was wanted.

Placing the headset on, Chris could hear the hammering of several heavy machine guns in the background and the yelling of orders.

"Sergeant McCall here."

"Chris, what's your situation up there?"

"Good Major! Five minor injuries, one relatively serious. Most of the enemy have surrendered at this position."

"Brilliant mate, absolutely brilliant!, listen in, I need you t' wait out. Secure the area, I'm still waiting to hear from the other guys near you but we're gettin' pinned down here. The bombardment has done fuck-all other than leave 500 severely pissed off dug-in Argies between us and Goose Green."

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"...by breakfast, my hairy arse!" Chris mumbled.

"Exactly!" replied Major Harkness - just as sarcastically.

"Sergeant, jus' sit tight, secure your position 'n' await further orders. Good job son!"

"Sir - Thank you - Sir!" The Major cut the transmission without another word.

"Private?" He turned to find the signaller sitting a few yards away. "Keep listening and let me know the second any orders come in!"

"Will do, Sergeant."

*"Corporals, on me, now!"* As the section leaders arrived, Chris explained what each of them were to do; two of them were to take the first and second stag shifts, the rest would be getting their heads down whilst they had the chance.

They all jogged off to pass the various orders on, leaving Chris to find a thoroughly darkened corner of the captured emplacement, he bedded down as best he could and waited.

Eventually, he slept.

## Chapter 4: The Memories

Hobbling across the kitchen in the direction of the kettle, Shona flicked the small black and white television in the kitchen on to add a little background noise.

Huffing, she refilled the silver stove-kettle then placed it back on the hob, lighting the cooker as she did so. She waited impatiently for it to boil, frowning, as she realised watching it won't make it any quicker.

Instead, she stared at the TV and lost all track of time as the news flashed the most recent pictures from the Falklands - 3 week old recordings.

They were reporting that the land-based assaults had begun early that morning. The 2nd Parachute Regiment were attacking Goose Green. Shona's heart seemed to fly out of her mouth as she slumped heavily on one of the kitchen seats and stared at the wall behind the television.

The hissing of boiling water made her jerk awake and she lifted the kettle whilst switching off the gas on the hob. The kettle felt lighter than it should have been; it had boiled away half the contents whilst she had sat staring in to space. Filling her mug she made a weak cup of coffee then sat back at the table, her eyes once again resting on the TV as they flashed pictures of the British ships being hit with the deadly Exochet missiles.

Taking a drink then placing the mug down, she jumped as the echo from the contact with the table startled her. Shona's chest wracked heavily as she fought to keep down that ever-present fear, terror and loneliness.

*"Why my husband?"* She tearfully asked the Defence Minister as he was interviewed on screen; wishing that he would ignore the reporters and answer her question.

He didn't.

She wept silently over the desperate emptiness that came from the perpetual uncertainty. The front door clicked and creaked; giving Shona enough time to wipe the tears away before a rhythmic clack-clack-clack, announced Joyce - Shona's mother-in-law - arriving for her daily visit. Joyce entered the kitchen and began fussing instantly.

"Morning." She said in her usual tone which always smacked of disapproval of one thing or another.

Shona rolled her eyes as the mother-in-law tottered around the kitchen; cleaning this; moving that; fiddling with something else. The usual bag of fresh supplies appeared from nowhere as she started to put them away.

"How are you today dear?" The back of Joyce's head asked as she busied herself.

"Sore back, sore arse, sore head, fat fingers, fat toes, huge stomach huge thighs, chubby cheeks and swollen ankles... Feels like I'm carrying re-enforcements for 2Para." Shona smiled but Joyce's face didn't even flicker slightly at the joke.

"Not long now!" she said in that infuriatingly patronising tone of hers. "Can't stay long today darlin'. Got things to arrange for Kate but she said she'll pop round later to see you."

Shona produced an Oscar winning look of disappointment despite the fact every cell in her body was delighted at the prospect of being spared yet more of her mother-in-law's company.

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After she had left, Shona struggled back to her feet and shuffled toward the bedroom, with the intention of getting dressed. Passing the full length mirror in her bedroom, she stopped and stroked her bulging belly. Her eyes wandered around the room, eventually coming to rest on the wedding photos beside the bed.

The emotions threatened to flood over her again as she struggled to retain her composure while she remembered their wedding day. The tears began to flow freely as more pictures filled her mind; her late father's face as he gave her away, Kate (Chris' younger sister) crying her eyes out so much that she looked like a panda, Shona's brother didn't know where to look as the tears threatened his eyes too and even Joyce - the hard faced mare - managed a smile or two.

"Stop it!" She said to herself. "No point making yourself more upset." The telling off helped a little but the thoughts still haunted her mind as she set about attempting the task and a half of getting dressed.

Half-an-hour of questing later she was dressed and lounging in the sitting room. The TV images jerked around from program-to-program as she stared at the wall above it. The regular news broadcasts - the only thing that actually caught Shona's attention - spoke of the loss of the Atlantic Conveyor, along with a huge number of supplies and all but a few of the heavy lifting helicopters to the deadly French-made anti-ship missiles.

Her thoughts again turned to her husband. *Is he cold? Is he OK? Is he frightened?* The questions kept coming and she couldn't stop the worry from crushing her defences and once-again leaving her feeling helpless and alone.

The morning came and went in an emotional blur and soon the baby began playing football with Shona's internal organs. Which, along with the thunderous rumbling of her stomach, signalled it was time for lunch. At the third attempt she got to her feet and stretched off as she waddled to the kitchen.

Opening the cupboard to check the contents; yet more tins of lentil soup had appeared, courtesy of Joyce. *Why always lentil?* Shona asked herself. *Fuckin' sick o lentil; looks like vomit, tastes like shit!* She selected a tin of tomato soup which had been buried at the back of the cupboard and attempted the fiddly mission of opening the can.

"Damn it!" The tin slipped from her grip for the third time after engaging the tin opener.

The news reported in the background that the British ground forces had engaged the enemy and had taken a few casualties. The war had now stepped up; it was no longer nameless missiles hitting faceless ships. The troops were involved and every single one of them she pictured with Chris' face.

All those men out there were somebody's Chris; sons, brothers, husbands, fathers! Tears rippled down her face as things hit home, far more brutally than before.

She felt helpless - she was helpless.

The soup tin slammed against the wall; finally surrendering its contents to superior force as Shona slumped to the floor sobbing.

## Chapter 5: The Reality of War

*"Sergeant, the Major is calling!"* The young signaller had to yell to break through the fog of sleep.

"One moment soldier."

Chris rubbed his eyes as he stood, the sleep had increased the feeling of fatigue and he yawned indulgently whilst walking to where the radio was situated.

"Sergeant McCall here." His voice sounding far more alert than he felt.

"Sergeant, how is everything up there?"

"All quiet on the Northern Front, Sir!"

Chris stifled another yawn.

"Good, part of the mortar platoon and their guard are moving toward you now. Once they're dug in, I want you to push on and assault the positions east of you."

"OK, Sir... And Major? Good luck down there."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Same to you. Don't do anything to get yourself killed."

"Easier said than done in our line of work, Major." Chris smiled grimly as he handed the headset back to the signaller.

"Private, pass word for the squad leaders to join me please." Chris walked off toward his Bergen to get breakfast on the go as he waited for the rest of the platoon NCO's.

They all joined him as the rations had finished heating up and he ate as he updated them on the plan for the day.

"OK guys, tell your men to grab a warm meal, it'll be cold rations until we take the next position. It's going to be bright-fuckin'-daylight we're attacking in today so get everyone to apply cam-paint and keep them firing and manoeuvring. Got it?" They all nodded. "OK, piss off, am eatin'!" He grinned, trying to show them more confidence than the gut-loosening fear he really felt.

Finishing his meal in silence, Chris gazed in to the near-distance; he could make out the outline of the next position through the early morning fog. With binoculars or a rifle scope he could probably make out the enemy numbers but decided against it. Better to fear the worst and hope for the best.

"Sergeant!" Chris turned to see Private Cole standing there with a full mess tin in his hand.

A few moments passed as the young man twitched nervously.

"I'm not a mind-reader Private!"

"Sorry Sergeant." He snapped to attention, minus the salute.

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"Sit down before you get me shot." Chris growled, he wasn't worried about any snipers yet but the Private had interrupted his planning.

"Sorry, Sergeant." Cole sat down, and lowered his voice. "Sarge, none of the others seem scared."

"They are; they can jus' hide it far better than you."

"I'm worried I'll freeze up out there." He looked ashamed of his admission.

"You won't!" Chris said simply, then realised he'd need to elaborate. "Listen in. Cole, if you keep thinking you'll freeze it'll eventually happen. Fear is good, mate; it keeps you alert, gets the adrenalin going but you can't let it control you. If you do, you're fucked; you'll get yourself and others killed. Just remember we're part of a team, jus' concentrate on watching your mates' backs and they'll watch yours. We're all scared shitless, so you aren't alone; just do not let fear win, remember your mates and remember your training," he was rather more harsh than intended but the message seemed to be sinking in.

They sat in silence until a Corporal shouted for Chris.

"What's all th' screamin' about?" Chris asked as he arrived beside one of the Junior Corporals.

"Mortars are here."

At that moment a man approached them, wearing the same insignia on his arm, showing he was also a member of the Parachute Regiment.

"Stevie, ya big ugly fucker!" Chris smiled as he recognised his old friend from basic training.

"Chrissy? I though' y'u'd be dead b' now, but by-fuck, it looks like you're in charge." Steve replied, genuinely impressed and proud of friend.

"Mortars?"

"Yeah, it's a real job, demands skill and thought to plant a mortar where y'u want it."

"Why the fuck did they pick you then?" Chris chuckled.

Steve scowled, and then broke into a laugh as he shook Chris' hand. "You lose any last night?" Steve's face turned serious.

"None; just a few injuries. You?"

"Naa, couldn't see us, so couldn't hit us, but by-bastard we let them know we were still there, the whole night."

"I was glad of the backup; I was shitting bricks before it all kicked off." His friend nodded knowingly.

"So, what's next for you guys?" Sighing and shrugging, Chris pointed to the next enemy position.

"Broad daylight, as soon as you guys are dug-in and ready."

Sucking air in through his teeth. Steve seemed to ponder something as he assessed the not-too-distant objective. After a few moments of considered silence, he grinned and slapped Chris on the back.

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"My guys will have your arses covered, should be fun, like ol' times eh? We smash them to bits; then you lot get up close 'n' jam a bayonet or two up their arses."

Chris smiled; his old friend could make nuclear physics sound simple.



## Chapter 6: The War at Home

Lying curled up on the floor, Shona wept bitterly. Every time she feels unable to cry anymore, her mind betrays her by projecting images of Chris dying and the tears return. Time has no meaning; she feels trapped in a bubble of memory and fear. Her sweatshirt is soaked through and the baby kicks frantically as she repeats the heartbreaking cycle over and over.

*Why won't it stop!*

She began searching her mind for memories of something good; something strong enough to overpower the imagined horrors and the ever-present dread. Finding one she focuses everything she has on it and begins replaying it in her mind.

Walking home, Shona was nervous. Her head spun with a myriad of emotions as her feet caressed the pavement. Checking her watch she sped up, aiming to get home before her husband. She couldn't decide whether she was happy or not, so much hinged on Chris' reaction to what she needed to tell him.

Almost running, Shona almost slipped as she rounded the last corner before the row of houses she was headed for.

*My home; our home.* How strange that sounded, even now, after over a year. They had bought this house together and the plan was simple; buy a house, get promoted, have kids.

*Well that one has gone to shit.* She thought as she reached the front door.

Fumbling the keys into the lock, a quick twist then she realises she needs to turn it the other way.

"Duh," she chuckles.

Eventually the door opens and the lip at the bottom of the door catches her foot, making her stumble. Shona recovered her balance, rushed into the house and dumped her bag and coat in the hall as she made for the sitting room. Her breathing steadied as she sat on the couch and tried to settle her nerves.

"Ok, calm down."

Thoughts bounced around her head as she anxiously watched the clock ticking down the seconds and minutes as she waited for her husband to return home.

A car pulled into the drive and Shona closed her eyes as she held her breath.

"Hey gorgeous, I'm home."

The familiar greeting triggered a flicker of Shona's lip as she tried to fight the urge to smile.

He walked into the sitting room and stopped in his tracks; a look of shock crossed his handsome face.

"Wow..."

*Oh no, he knows.* She thought.

## Casualty of Conflict

"What's wrong?" she eventually forced out.

"... You get more and more beautiful every day." He replied happily.

Shona took a deep breath. "Chris, we need to talk?"

"Uh-oh, that sounds optimistic."

She raised her eyebrows. "You know the word's ominous, you just do that t' annoy me."

He chuckled.

"Chris, I'm pregnant..." Shona took a sudden interest in the carpet as Chris' face formed a confused expression.

"Does..." his voice dropped to a whisper and she hears him gulp. "... Does that mean yer going to get fat?"

She looked up at him in time to catch the ear-splitting grin as it crossed his face.

"You mean you're not mad?"

"Nope. I'm gonna be a da', how could I be mad at no longer bein' the most immature person in th' house?"

He laughed and stepped forward to hug Shona tightly.

Shona came around to the sound of the front door being opened and closed, she quickly tried to dry her tears, it was only then she realised how wet the sweatshirt was.

"Oh my Lord," said Kate as she ran the last few steps to Shona's side.

Kate pulled Shona towards her and held Shona in a tight hug while she stroked her forehead and rocked gently back and forth.

"Oh god, I should have been here sooner. I'm so, so sorry." Kate whispered tearfully.

## Chapter 7: The Fight for Life

Sergeant McCall stared across at the enemy positions praying for a way to minimise the casualties his unit would inevitably take. His gaze kept returning to the same spot and he couldn't quite grasp why. Walking away he went towards his men, a half-thought had begun forming in his mind.

"Cole, have you seen Alec?" he asked as he passed the young private.

The young soldier pointed off towards the left and Chris wandered off in the indicated direction; quickly locating the man he needed.

"Alec, follow me, I need you to do somethin' for me." The young man stood and followed Chris back to the position he had been observing the enemy from before.

"Ok, do you see that line of rocks to the North?" Chris asked.

"Yeah," the man replied, avoiding looking directly at the site.

"... I need you to scout it out for us. I can't quite put my finger on it but... there is somethin' I'm missin' here. I want you to see what it is I'm missin' and where it goes. Understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant, I think I catch yer meanin'. I'll go get m'kit 'n' move out, ASAP," answered the young sniper as he turned around and trotted away.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chris spent the next half-hour fretting that he had sent one of his best men away on a waste of time, but at the same time he had to know what was in amongst those rocks. He relaxed slightly as he saw Alec return with a grin on his face.

"Well?" Chris asked impatiently as the sniper knelt beside him.

"Ye were right. There is something there."

Alec then went on to explain what he had found and his grin spread to Chris' face. Once the sniper had exhausted his report and answered all his Sergeant's questions he was dismissed and ordered to get prepared.

Chris took one last look at the enemy - subconsciously assessing the target - then marched away towards his men.

Calling for his squad leaders, Chris looked at the men around him. They were in good spirits considering where they were and what they're about to do. Sergeant McCall always found it amazing that so many young men could laugh and joke whilst staring death in the face. He continued watching and did his best to figure out who would be injured and who would be lucky enough to die outright rather than lingering in agony.

For a fleeting moment, he hoped it would be him. He wanted to be relieved of the responsibility; the pressure of having so many lives in his hands was hard to bear. If he fucked up; people would be hurt. If he fucked up; his men, his friends, would die.

*Men will die even if I get it right, bugger,* he thought as a morbid smile of resignation crept across his lips.

## Casualty of Conflict

Looking at his watch, Chris realised he had wasted twenty minutes with his reverie, time he could have used for ironing out the plan of attack. He spun around abruptly and marched back towards his equipment.

*"Corporals, on me, now!"* Everyone turned as they detected the ferocity in his voice.

*"Did that sound like a fucking request?"* Chris barked and everyone jumped - they all tried to look busy as the squad leaders rushed to obey.

In ones and twos they arrived and snapped to attention as the Sergeant glared at them all.

"... He looks pissed," one of the braver - or more foolish - men whispered to be met by a growl for silence.

Chris waited for silence. "Ok girls, I want your input on this fuckin' insanity of a broad daylight attack..." Chris went on to explain the objectives and the plan he had formed in his mind.

"It's a retarded plan, Sarge, whose idea was it?" Ventured one of the men as Chris finished outlining the plan.

*"Mine,"* he roared, "you're in the army, not the fuckin' Women's Institute."

"Sorry, Sarge, it's a fantastic plan, but may I suggest something?" Corporal Barnes answered with a grin as he indicated to the map they had been looking at.

Chris nodded and for the next little while they all had their input. The plan was adjusted, improved and the Sergeant smiled as they made the plan their own. He was beginning to think that this just might work and - judging by the smiles all round - the men on whom the plan depended believed so too.

Their objective was in fact part of the Northern end of the Darwin hillocks; once they had kicked the enemy off that hill, they could begin the real push for Goose Green. Chris shuddered inwardly. So far HQ and A company had taken the brunt of the enemy artillery but once past that hill, they would all be within its sights. Dismissing them back to their troops, he turned to take one last lingering look at their objective.

Taking a deep breath, Chris said, "Fuck it!" with feeling before turning back to prepare his gear for the next suicide mission.

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They were as ready as they would ever be; armed-to-the teeth and grim-faced, his men waited just beneath the lip of a small rise in the ground.

He took a deep breath, as much to prepare himself as to fuel the shout.

*"Advance."*

They crested the hill and the eerie silence was shattered as the entire hillside erupted with muzzle flashes and shouting as if the enemy had been awakened rudely from a slumber.

He saw one of his men go down but the man picked himself up and carried on, hunched low, using any and every feature for cover. Chris brutally quelled the fear rising in him and the chill down his spine sent the adrenaline rushing through him as he picked up his pace.

Spotting a head pop up periodically, Chris stopped and turned to the Signaller with him.

## Casualty of Conflict

"Tell the mortars to kick off..."

The Signaller nodded and leaned over the radio getting the message back to Stevie.

\*\*\*\*\*

Steve watched in awe as the entire company advanced - his friend's platoon included. He was reasonably safe in his position dug in on the ridge Chris and his men had taken early this morning but Steve's stomach had set up camp in his throat as he watched his friend advance into the teeth of the shit-storm, just over a mile away.

His men shifted uncomfortably as they watched men go down all across the line and Steve felt the same way.

*Come on, Chrissy, give the signal,* he worried it would never come but the radio crackled to life.

"... Mortars, Sergeant McCall sends his regards and asks if you'd mind kickin' off," the voice came across, clear as day and calm as you like.

Steve smiled. *"You heard 'em boys, lets boot-some-balls."*

Within moments of the order, the ranging shots were on their way. Any adjustments needed were made and then the whole unit went to work bombarding the enemy.

"Beautiful!" Steve whispered with feeling as the thunk-thunk-thunk soundtrack settled into a continuous rhythm of death.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chris watched as the mortars landed on enemy positions all over the hillside. Then, he gave the signal to continue the advance, praying that the spotters would get the timing right for the bombardment to "walk" its way up the hill as his men moved to each waypoint.

Within moments machine gun nests had targeted his men again but they were doing well, only a few of his men had been hit, and not too seriously. The rough ground gave them partial cover from the incoming fire as they trotted forward.

*Only idiots and psychopaths would run towards the bullets,* Chris thought as he returned fire on an enemy position which had pinned a few of his men down.

*Which one am I?* He thought as he chuckled.

The Signaller with him chimed in and they suppressed the position enough for three of his men to charge and take the position at bayonet point.

"One - nil, to the Brits." The comms soldier muttered.

Chris smiled in response but the expression lacked any real humour as he looked across to see the rest of the advance had stalled. Groups of his men were being pinned down by heavy fire from a machine gun nest which clearly had them zeroed in. Frustration rippled through him, he had no way to help, they were too far away and the enemy between his position and theirs may have something to say about the matter.

## Casualty of Conflict

Swallowing his anger at the plight of his men he pushed on. The small squad following on as they exchanged fire with an Argentine position further up the hill. Two of his men had fortified the taken position off to his left and were laying down suppressive fire with a Light Section Weapon. Chris approved of this ingenuity and took advantage of the covering fire to close the distance. One of the soldiers with him tripped and failed to get back up. He watched as the man was rolled over and the Sergeant's mind went blank as he spotted the wound in the man's head.

The field medic pulled the body off to one of the captured positions; for collection later, as Chris carried on up the hill. They charged when within yards of the nest and jumping down, Chris swung his weapon up in time to deflect a rifle butt aimed at his head, following through with bayonet to take the man under the chin. Blood sprayed all over the place as he reversed the blade out. With a quick glance round he could see his men were carrying the position and some of the enemy were running up the hill to the next position and beyond.

Risking another look, he could see the other group was still pinned over on his right. Just at the moment he turned to get a better look, something occurred.

Almost in slow motion, Chris watched as Lance-Corporal Bingley and one of the young privates - Grayling - sprinted out from cover and charged the machine gun nest pinning their unit down, firing as they went. His pride turned to horror as they were both hit roughly 10 yards from their target. The gun-crew covering the far right had been hit though, and this was all the opening the rest needed as they charged out of cover and took the position fighting hard against the platoon dug in around the nest.

This was not what Chris had been watching though.

Grayling was still moving.

"*Medic*," Chris yelled and indicated the young injured man thirty yards away.

As he turned, he ticked off two of his men and had them follow him whilst he ran to cover the medic and young Grayling.

"Well done lad, that was insane but brave," Chris grinned as he laid a hand on the other's shoulder, gripping firmly. He wanted to say he was proud, he wanted to tell the lad he may have just won the battle for them but couldn't find the words.

"Sarge, Bingley?" Despite the pain he must've been in he was still worried about his friend.

Chris' heart swelled, "Sorry, mate. He's gone, but look, you both took out the gun crew... if it's up to me you'll both be decorated."

"I'd rather have Bingley back..."

Chris was saved from having to reply as the private was injected with morphine and slipped into dreamland as the medic and a stretcher team prepared to move him.

They rushed him off towards the rear and Chris took another look round, all along the line the battle was being won, step by bloody step the company was driving the enemy back. He relayed the signal and the Milan anti tank platoon attacked from the gully Chris had spotted earlier. The flanking position the gully gave them had been too good an opportunity to turn down, and now it was being used to devastate the enemy positions with rocket fire.

## Casualty of Conflict

A short time later the enemy on the hill surrendered.

*I would too*, he thought as he watched the prisoners being herded away from their positions.

A little while later, after Chris had noted down his recommendation for Bingley and Grayling - in case he wasn't around to do it later - the news filtered through that A company had taken the South and D Company had taken the North.

The bad news was "H" - the CO of the 2Para contingent - had been killed in action. This came as a blow to Chris and he openly wept as the news came through that the man had died leading a charge on an enemy position, inspiring his men to later take the position.

His men were exhausted and in shock; despite the heavy fire, relatively few men were wounded or killed. Men routinely checked themselves over and over to make sure they weren't full of holes they hadn't noticed.

Chris sighed and stood up. *"Prepare to move out. We push on in ten minutes."*

## Chapter 8: The True Cost

Kate leaned back against the kitchen cabinet as she cradled her sister-in-law.

"I'm sorry; mum said you looked upset earlier but I took my time getting here. I've got some news that should make you feel better..." Kate whispered softly into Shona's ear.

She still wept but seemed to come back from whatever dark place she was in and began to stir.

"That's it honey, come back to me. I have news about Chris."

Shona sat up suddenly and looked Kate in the eye. "I... is he hurt?"

Smiling and shaking her head, Kate slowly got back to her feet and offered a hand to Shona. She took it and used it to lever herself back to her feet. They shuffled through the house to the sitting room with Kate's arm supporting Shona and gently stroking her shoulder. Chris' wife leaned into the arm - the only direct human contact she has had since Chris left and Kate guided them both to the couch and pulled Shona into a hug whilst she pushed sweat-and-tear-soaked hair away from her sister-in-law's eyes.

Shona felt so ashamed. Here she was falling apart and then there was Kate, her future husband and her brother had both gone to war.

"Sorry, I'm being really selfish." She told Kate while avoiding eye contact.

"Eh?"

"Your brother, and your fiance, both gone, it must be really difficult for you too but here I am, coming apart at the seams." Shona struggled to hold back the ever-present misery.

"Don't be daft. Allan's safe, he is on Ascension Island with the Vulcan bombers. He's not in anymore danger than you or me..."

"... I'm in danger of drownin' in my own tears." Shona chuckled tearfully.

Kate frowned. "Chris will go ballistic when he finds out we haven't looked after you properly."

She tilted her head slightly - a mannerism that always reminded Shona of Chris - and then using a crooked index finger, lifted Shona's head up to look her in the eyes.

"Your husband, is fine! Allan said the casualty lists pass through Ascension and he has asked one of the communications officers to keep him updated on whether Chris is on it and he is not. They are attacking and Allan says despite taking casualties and being outnumbered, the Paras are pushing the enemy back. Very few men have been killed outright so far."

Shona jumped forward and wrapped her arms around Kate in a fierce hug. A wave of relief washed over her and she cried again, this time with happiness. The baby kicked excitedly and Shona drew back from the hug and grabbed Kate's hand; placing it on her stomach.

The pushing sensation against her hand caused Kate's mind to go blank as her niece or nephew seemed to be showing appreciation for the news. Kate smiled.



## Casualty of Conflict

"How're you copin'?"

"Am not, you saw the state of me, I fall to pieces everytime the fuckin' news comes on and I don't know how much more of this empty house I can handle..." Shona paused.

The sadness threatened to engulf her again, the struggle was clearly visible on her face as a single tear broke through followed by another. The dam bursts and she leans forward to try to cover her face.

"... I'm s...sorry, I'm such a bloody mess."

Kate stayed silent and wrapped her arms around Shona again, her heart breaking as she helplessly watched someone she loves in pain.

After a while Shona gets a grip of herself and sits up, a sheepish expression on her face as she feels ashamed, this time for seeming to give in.

Kate's head shot up. "I'll move in here 'til he's back, it's perfect; I can look after you 'n' my niece and saves me from rattling round my house alone as well."

"Are you sure?"

"Aye, of course."

"Thank you so much, you have no idea how relieved I am that I won't be stuck here alone torturing myself day after day."

"It's a plan then. Let's get you changed and cleaned up a bit, we'll go for a walk then get some stuff from and go out for a meal. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." Answered Shona displaying the first real smile she had for days.

They both stood and walked upstairs to the main bedroom and Shona set about cleaning her face and giving her hair a quick wash before drying it and placing it up in a ponytail. Kate busied herself finding some clothes for Shona.

"Ha, you look a bit more human now, see a quick wash and clean clothes can do ye wonders," said Kate as Shona walked back into the room.

"I feel it too, thank you, I still feel like a beached whale though."

Kate chuckled and bowed theatrically, "You look absolutely *glowing*, my lady. Shall we?" she offers Shona a hand and with a giggle, Shona takes it.

They head back downstairs to collect their bags and coats before walking out the door.

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The two women walked down the main street towards the Royal Hotel, where they intended to have their meal. Shona felt much better and was delighted Kate was moving in, at least for a while.

They reached the doors to the hotel and were just about to enter when someone shouted.

## Casualty of Conflict

"Shona, Kate? Hello," the woman crossed the road and approached them.

"Oh fuck..." Kate muttered as she tried to drag Shona into the hotel to escape the woman who was now just metres away. "...Shona, please you don't need to talk to her, not in your state of mind."

She became more insistent but Shona refused to budge and just waited on the woman.

"Hi, how's Chris?" the woman slurred slightly.

Kate stepped forward placing herself directly between Shona and the woman.

"... Last we heard he's ok, considering." Shona replied.

"That's nice, he goes to play toy soldiers while my Bill getsch incinerated by those fuckin' ship mishiles," the acidic tone is unmistakable despite the slur.

Shona stiffened, her eyes blazed, then she darted forward with a speed that belied her stage of pregnancy, then grabbed the woman by the throat and slammed her against the hotel wall.

Her eyes narrowed as she came face-to-face with the drunk woman.

*"Toy-fucking-soldiers? Right now my husband is involved in a fierce battle, his men are outnumbered 2 to 1 and you call it toy-fucking-soldiers?"*

*"I am 7 months pregnant and my husband could die, he may even be dead now. I have to live with that thought every second of every fucking day and all the while I am torturing myself with images of him lying bleeding somewhere in a bog or on some god-forsaken hillside. I am sorry about your husband but if you ever belittle any serviceman's efforts again I swear I will scoop out your uterus with my bare hands and feed it to you. Are we clear, you drunken nutcase?"* She surprised herself at the ferocity of her speech, but gave one last glare to show she meant business.

Shona then turned away and guided a stunned-looking Kate into the hotel for the meal they had planned, and suddenly she realised she was starving.

## Chapter 9: The Chaos

The entire company moved out towards their next objective - the airfield - and as they marched Chris couldn't help but picture the faces of the dead. Relatively speaking, casualties were light but he still felt the losses keenly. Most of the men were exhausted but grimly determined to get the job done for their lost friends.

*No, not friends... Chris thought. They are brothers. Family.*

This thought put steel into him and he pushed on through the exhaustion and grief as they made a staggered advance toward the airfield.

They came upon a vehicle track, one of the few "roads" in the Falklands and Chris halted his unit as another made to cross it under the cover of his guns. A bad feeling pulsed through him as he watched them jump down and cross the well worn ground.

There was a sound in the distance which filled Chris with dread as his subconscious seemed to guess what it was and was too scared to let him in on the secret. The noise grew closer and he finally recognised it.

*"... Get down, get to cover. Incoming!"* Chris yelled at everyone within earshot and watched as the men scattered.

Too late, the two Pucara ground attack aircraft appeared almost from nowhere and were already lined up on the road. Chris watched in utter hopelessness as they began to strafe the road. Some men caught out in the open tried desperately to avoid the seemingly-inocuous looking pock marks being thrown up on the road, knowing they brought only death and pain.

Chris looked around frantically for his signaller, and on finding him, told him to set up the radio. Moments later the soldier handed Chris the receiver.

"... This is Sergeant McCall of "B" Company, 2PARA, we are under attack from two, I repeat, two ground attack aircraft... Requesting air support immediately near the Goose Green airfield. We're being torn apart here," as he made the call the aircraft passed overhead and Chris breathed in relief as he saw no bombs on the undercarriages of both jets.

"... Sorry Sergeant... All aircraft are busy on combat air patrols or ground attack elsewhere... Sit tight for now," came the reply.

"Are you fucking kiddin' me? What use are combat air patrols if they don't patrol the fucking air where they're needed? If you don't send us some support, we will lose an entire company to those bastard planes."

"Negative, we have nothing spare to send you at this moment. Get to cover and try to drive them off with small arms fire."

"Fuck you..." said Chris, "... have you ever tried shooting a fuckin' jet in flight? It's like trying to shoot the testicles off a fly you incompetent little toad. I'd like to see you come try this. Sergeant McCall out."

He handed the receiver back to the signaller and looked on in frustration as the aircraft reached the end of their run and banked off to the East to begin a long turn to line up the next run. Chris signalled to the nearest machine gun teams and indicated for them to get their GPMGs set up on an incline to allow them to target the enemy planes as they come back into range. The slight dip also gave them some cover which he found

## Casualty of Conflict

reassuring, slightly.

He watched them continue the long turn and a small trail of smoke caught his eye. It seemed to be trailing directly after the aircraft and he had dismissed it as vapour from their engines when, suddenly, with a slight flair the trail realigned itself and continued on towards the aircraft.

A knowing grin flickered across his mouth as he watched the two planes split off and begin twisting and turning.

"Sergeant are you ok?" Cole asked.

Chris just pointed to the tiny flare of flame as it seemed to be drawn to one of the Pucarás.

"... What is i..." Cole looked confused.

"Sidewinder!" he whispered to the young private.

Moments later the jet - which had been wildly banking and rolling - was torn apart by an explosion that Chris fancied he could hear. Everyone around him cheered.

Chris turned to the North in time to see the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life. A Royal Navy Sea Harrier roared towards them at the speed of sound and as it passed, the pilot performed a barrel-roll, to the applause and raucous cheers of the entire unit. Chris felt a thrill of hope and excitement as he watched the jumpjet peel off and speed after the remaining enemy.

The radio crackled and the pilot's voice came through, calm and precise:

"... I heard you lot were in a bit of a pickle."

Chris laughed as he took the receiver from the signaller again. "Naa, just a couple of arsehole flyboys trying to ruin our day."

There was silence as Chris watched, the single Harrier caught up to the enemy jet and - almost effortlessly - blew it out of the sky with a burst from its cannons.

A chuckle rang out clearly from the radio, "... We can't have that, now can we?"

Smiling, Chris put the receiver to his ear again. "Thank you, you saved a lot of my guys. Now - it's time you disappear before their AAs lock on you."

"Good luck boys," and with that the Harrier sped off out of sight, back towards its patrol area.

*"Move out, we've still got an airfield to take."* Chris yelled and everyone responded, they quickly formed up and continued the advance.

They crossed the road safely and were within sight of the airfield. They used dips, rocks and gulleys to get them closer but that now-familiar feeling of dread rippled through Chris again as they got closer. Something kept niggling at him the entire time.

"Halt," he ordered as the unease became unbearable.

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Another platoon Sergeant approached Chris. "Why have we stopped?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Chris said as he shook his head and shrugged, "a bad feeling I can't shake, there is something I am just not seeing here."

The other nodded and looked around for a few moments, his face creased in concentration, "... there's no enemy..."

Realisation dawned on Chris, "fuck that's it, there's no incomin' fire. Where are they? I'd expect at least sporadic bursts by now, we've been in range for a while."

"*Ambush...*" the shout had come from somewhere up ahead and intense gunfire shattered the unease Chris had been feeling.

He sprinted towards the sound of fire and saw a group of his men caught in a crossfire. The other platoon Sergeant was still beside him and had gathered men on the way. Chris quickly sized the situation up and began issuing orders concisely. Taking a squad's worth of men with him, he circled around the flanks of one of the enemy groups and charged them.

No thought, no hesitations, Chris pushed his exhausted body across the open ground. He prayed the enemy would not spot him yet, and his prayer was answered. Chris and the men with him fixed bayonets whilst on the run.

*100 yards to go... 80... 60...* he thought as his strides ate away at the distance.

Adrenalin burst into his veins as the exhilaration of impending combat filled him with new energy and an intense feeling of being alive. The enemy were still fixated on their target off to Chris' left.

*20 yards... 10... 5...*

"... *Charge!*" Chris shouted as his men reached the enemy and then, they were on them, among them.

A scream ripped from Chris; a mixture of pure joy and unbridled rage as he snatched the life of his first opponent with a brutal bayonet thrust to the gut. And then he was gone and another Argentinean was in front, Chris felt ashamed as he recognised the terror in the young conscript's eyes but thrust the man's pathetic attack aside and without any conscious thought returned a deadly riposte across the throat with his knife which had suddenly appeared in his hand.

A red mist had descended on him as he fought; he was angry with them, all this pointless bloodletting for the sake of a century-old claim to a sheep-filled, lump of rock.

"... British rock," he screamed hellishly at another enemy soldier who seemed to hesitate at the twisted and deranged look in Chris' eyes.

No hesitation on Chris' side however as he clubbed the man down with his rifle butt. The first blow knocked the man down, the second caved in his skull.

The rest of this half of the ambush party backed away, Chris followed allowing a demented grin of promised death to animate his lips.

## Casualty of Conflict

They began to throw down their weapons and begged in Spanish to be taken prisoner. Chris would have none of it though as he approached them with that frightening grin stretched across his blood-drenched face.

"No surrender for you, motherfucker," he said as he raised his rifle and took aim at the nearest man's chest.

The man became frantic and begged, or Chris assumed he was begging, he didn't really care. He just watched the man's eyes widen as he slowly started to squeeze the trigger.

## Chapter 10: The Little Victories

Shona and Kate exited the hotel after their meal and took a right to walk back towards home. Kate had finally found her voice again after the "incident" with the woman earlier.

"... So, are we goin' to talk about what happened or you goin' to sit there slack-jawed all night?" Shona smiled at Kate who responded with a chuckle.

"And say what exactly? Here, Shona, you threw her about like a ragdoll, what's yer secret?"

Shona laughs, "Oh come on, I wasn't that bad was I?"

"Ahem, you scared me half to death, I thought you were about to kill her. She thought so too, judging by the look in her eyes."

She dropped her head, "Yep, I'm not exactly proud of that one."

"...Why the hell not? You stood up for your husband and though it is a hard thing for her to lose her man but doesn't give her the right to make snidey comments about my brother. If you hadn't done that, I would have," Kate replied indignantly.

Shona looked at Kate as they walked side by side. "Thank you," she whispered, with unseen tears wetting her eyes.

"For what?" Kate tilted her head - reminding Shona of her absent husband and the worry gained a foothold again.

"For being here, for me, for us," she stroked her belly gently whilst she looked at Kate.

The baby kicked again and Shona laughed, "... it seems baby approves of auntie Kate too."

Kate looked embarrassed as they rounded the corner into Shona's street. She kept thinking about her brother and was just as worried about him, but she resolved to do the only thing she could do to help him. She would look after his family, whether Shona wanted it or not.

"You're welcome, now stop embarrassing me, I'll end up with a permanent red neck if you keep this up," she laughed and Shona smiled.

"Ok, but just know I am..." the baby booted Shona's belly, "... Ok, ok, *we* are grateful," she looked down at her bulging belly, "Happy now?"

They both laughed as they reached the house and Shona fumbled around her bag for the keys.

"Everythin'... bloody... kitchen sink," she mumbled in frustration as she felt around for them.

Eventually with a squeel of triumph she located them and opened the door. They both walked in and slammed the door shut behind them. Shona kicked her shoes off with a huff as she removed her jacket and threw it in the cupboard with her bag - missing the hooks by about a mile. Kate followed behind, tidying up a little and hanging both their coats up. They both walked into the sitting room and Shona flicked the TV on before sitting down on the couch opposite.

## Casualty of Conflict

She searched through the channels and found the news and left it on as she wandered to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

"... want a cup of tea?" she yelled through to Kate from the kitchen.

"Aye, milk, two sugars please."

Shona walked back in and sat down as she waited for the water to boil on the stove.

"... Reports indicate that British Paratroopers have pushed the enemy back, taken Darwin Hill and Boca House and are in the process of assaulting the airfield. Despite their early setbacks, the commanders are confident of taking the settlement shortly after."

Both women smiled and hugged one another as the news carried on and Shona stood as the kettle whistled and she went back to the kitchen. A chorus of curses and clinking followed before she returned, cups in hand. She sat down and handed Kate a cup.

They finished their drinks a little while later and upon finding a film to watch they settled in to watch it.

As the film finished Kate shook Shona gently - she had long since fallen asleep with her head on Kate's lap. Kate then guided her upstairs to bed and they both fell asleep hugging one another.



## Chapter 11: The Casualties Begin

He blinked the sweat from his eyes as his mind screamed at him to kill them all but his heart said no. He hesitated and adjusted his grip on the rifle as his finger twitched on the trigger. Chris felt a hand being placed on his shoulder as an arm came into his visual range and he didn't resist as the arm pushed the muzzle of the rifle down gently. â ©â ©

"Sergeant, don't do this. It's not you and you'll regret it. You're not a murderer," the voice was so soft and reassuring that he felt the rage lift from him and was suddenly overcome with shame.

Chris finally raised his eyes to meet Private Cole's gentle gaze.

"Thank you," he whispered and then turned to walk away from the young man.â ©â ©

*Fuck, fuck, fuck. I can't believe I nearly butchered someone.* He berated himself as he wandered back towards the ambush site.â ©â ©

"Corporal, take charge here and secure the prisoners to be sent to the rear, then sweep the area and give the guys an hour's rest, we'll move out again after that," he gave the orders in a voice that spoke volumes about the exhaustion and shame he felt. â ©â ©

As he wandered back around to where the ambush had been sprung he recognised straightaway how lucky they had been. There were more than a few who had been hit but the quick response by the rest of the unit had taken out the ambush parties before any real damage could be done. Chris allowed himself a moment of satisfaction at the lives his men and he had saved.

He let out a slow, loud breath and sucked in a lungful of air as he surveyed the airfield. *Not much further to Goose Green*, he thought. The settlement lay just a few miles away from the positions they had just overrun and Chris was determined to take it by morning.

His mind ran over the events of only a short time before and felt a wave of shame that he could so easily lose his self-control in such a way. It was worse that Cole had felt the need to step in. *He showed some balls stepping in front of me and lowering my rifle though.* Chris resolved to thank the boy properly for stopping his rampage, and with that he began to make peace with what had happened.

He would never forget and would learn from it, no more torturing himself though. *There has to be a line, or we risk becoming not only war criminals but the very worst of human beings who prey on those weaker than them and I will die before becoming one.* His force of will imprinted this in his mind and he turned back to his men refreshed.

Chris began issuing orders for retrieving the injured or dead who were lying around and ushered the men along as he supervised; they would move out soon so time was a factor here. Twenty minutes later they were enjoying a last short rest and scouting patrols were out as they sought contact with the enemy. He heard a short, distant burst of fire, he sighed and pushed himself to his feet taking a mouthful of water and swirled it around his mouth before swallowing. As he expected - one of the patrols tore back over the slight hill to the South and sprinted to Chris.

The sniper leading the small patrol stopped and grinned.

"I am pleased to report contact with the enemy," he panted out after a few moments leaning over.

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Chris smiled grimly, "Thanks Alec, anyone get hit?"

"Nope, we found them and decided to fuck wit' them a little," his smile shortened and twisted, turning his grin to a cocky smirk, "... we spread out over the gulley lip and started firing on the School, jus' to put the wind up 'em and 'cause we couldn't see how many there were..."

"And?"

"... they took the bait. Started firing off in all directions. They're dug in at the school house and have all the approaches covered by MGs and small arms. This is goin' to be a heavy cluster fuck because they have aimed their AAs at the ground covering the area as well. That's why we legged it."

Sergeant McCall cursed quietly and continually as he picked up his gear from the ground next to him. He dismissed Alec and thought about yet another hard battle ahead. Gunfire broke out again in the distance. Chris guessed "C" Company had engaged the enemy and were meeting the resistance Alec had mentioned. He grimaced as he humped the Bergen onto his back and slung his rifle strap over his head.

*"Everybody up and at 'em, move out!"*

\*\*\*\*\*

They left the airfield and made their way towards the settlement of Goose Green, the school was right on the edge of it and was ideally situated to provide firing arcs over the open area nearby, making it a great place to set up.

*... And the Argies certainly didn't look that fucking gift horse in the mouth, did they?* Chris thought as the building came gradually closer. They were now close enough to make out the pock marks on the white, roughcast walls and the sandbags stacked at the small windows. The most alarming thing was the number of muzzles sticking out the windows. In parts it looked like a giant white and black hedgehog.

It only took a few more minutes before they could clearly hear the exchanges of gunfire from those holed up in the house and "C" Company who were pinned down in some ditch over to the East of where Chris and his men were following a gulley in staggered formations. Finally they began to come within range of the enemy and they received a warm welcome as the enemy turned their anti-aircraft guns on the new arrivals.

*"Fuck,"* he cursed as a flack shell hit the rocks just below the position he had crawled to for a better view of the field. "Cole, get Alec."

The private nodded and jogged off to look for Chris' favourite scout. They returned after a few minutes and Chris beckoned them both to him.

"Ok, I need you - both of you - to head around to "C" Company and get the sitrep from their commander and ask what assistance he needs from us. Any questions?" They both shook their heads, "Ok, stay low. Dismissed."

They both ran off and were lost to sight within minutes as they ducked behind the limited cover between the two Companies.

He dared another look over the open ground and thought he could see a teddy bear hanging next to one of the windows. *Strange,* he thought, *under fire from an enemy and despite all the guns nearby the first thing my eye is drawn to, is a bloody teddy?* Chris shook his head in dark amusement at such a seemingly random

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placement of something not connected with war.

Alec and Cole soon returned and their faces told the story before they even reached the area where Chris was lying in wait for their return. Chris reflected their expressions as they approached.

"What's the news?"

Alec and Cole look at one another and their faces dropped further. Alec cleared his throat, "Umm, their Lieutenant is dead, Sergeant." The gulp from the sniper was loud enough to hear. "We had to speak to their platoon Sergeant. He's pinned down in a gully with no way back as a few of the AAs have their position zeroed in so that if they move they are exposed and then as good as dead."

"What was your assessment of the situation?" asked Chris as he sensed there was more to what Alec had to say.

"He's given up, sarge. He seems unwilling to try anything and all the guys look demoralised... and no wonder."

Chris raised an eyebrow but didn't speak.

Alec continued. "... the Argies were all ready to surrender, like and the Lieutenant and a Lance Corporal went forward to accept it, but "A" Company, up on Darwin Hill, to the East, sarge, they... umm... must've thought they were supporting an attack because they began laying down suppressive fire on the school. The guys inside responded and... well... you can guess the rest." He finished and shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably.

He nodded in understanding and hid the pain of the news from them. *Yet more dead. Another mate just... gone.* He thought while trying to work out what had to be done next. Sergeant McCall knew the house position had to go but ultimately he would lose men with no substantial support from "C" company and the incoming fire from the AA battery in Goose Green he was at a loss.

"Sergeant..." Private Cole whispered nervously, breaking into Chris' thoughts. "... I say we attack, the school has... has to go and it should encourage "C" to get off their arses and help."

An explosive sigh followed and Chris stood, looked around and nodded. "You're right, Cole. Thank you again. You wanna take point with me on this one lad?"

Cole's face lit up, he was getting the chance to go in on the first wave of the attack. The crippling nerves and fears he had shown just days ago had burned away in the heat of combat and now he wanted to push on.

"Ok, pass the word - quietly to prepare for the assault of the school." The young private and Alec ran off to pass the word and collect their gear. Private Cole returned quickly, eager to get going. Chris smiled to himself.

"Private, are you not missing somethin'?"

"Oh shit, my rifle." All the men nearby burst into fits of laughter as an abashed-looking Cole ran off to grab his weapon.

This had the effect of a lightened mood for everyone as they prepared for the attack. All-too-soon everything was ready, everyone in position. There wasn't a fancy feint or a complex plan. It had to be a simple run-gun-and-pray-not-to-die. Chris sent a swift prayer off, not for himself but for his wife and his sister. This

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brought back the thoughts that had been in the back of his mind all the way through the conflict and the journey to the Falklands - the birth of his child and giving his baby sister away at her wedding.

Chris wondered what they were both doing now, *probably joining forces against the evil of mum*. He chuckled quietly at the mental image of his wife and sister holding up crosses, brandishing wooden stakes and wearing garlic to fend off his mother.

The thought calmed him and he nodded to Cole who ran up and over the lip of the gulley. Chris followed, right into a nightmare.

The enemy had been waiting, he knew this but the speed of their response stunned Chris. As everyone followed onto the open ground it soon became clear just how much shit was going to rain down on all them. Machine guns, rifles, pistols - even rockets all seemed to open up the second the attack began and they never let up.

Cole was doing well, he returned enemy fire and dodged, Chris following in his wake as bullets whizzed by them. Then, Cole was gone, Chris had enough time to register this before the shockwave hit him.

*Fuckin' artillery*. Was his last thought before a burning sensation hit him and the darkness took him.

## Chapter 12: The Pain

He drifted in and out of consciousness as men shouted, the crack of bullets tore through the air and shells exploded all around him. Chris quickly learned to welcome the blackouts as whenever he awoke he became enshrouded in agonising pain. He felt the cold, damp grass at his back and let out a groan.

"Shit... Sarge?" a distant voice said. "Private... come on... Grab a strap and pull... To cover."

Chris came around again to the pain - worse than anything he had ever felt in his life - and felt himself sliding along the ground, then being heaved and bumping down something hard.

"... *Bastard!*" comes tearing from his mouth as the rocks ripped into his back.

A chuckle comes from near at hand, "Sounds fine to me. Sarge, it's Alec, can you hear me?"

Chris felt his hand being grasped and squeezed as hard as he could, for - try as he might - he couldn't force any other words out. The burning pain rippled along Chris' side and he blacked out again.

"*Medic.*" Alec yelled as he felt the hand relax in his.

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Chris continued to come-to in waves of excruciating pain, hearing snatches of voices as Alec seemed to melt into the face of a medic - he could see the red cross on his arm - then he awoke again and could hear the rhythmic thumping of a helicopter and he found himself staring at a metal roof.

"He's awake again... Sergeant? Chris... You're being evacuated, squeeze my hand if you understand..." Chris managed to squeeze and then groaned in agony as more pain exploded through his body.

The man above him looked familiar as he spoke to someone Chris couldn't see.

"He's in agony... Give him something... The pain."

"He's already... As much as we can safely give him... We'll be... Hospital ship soon." He slipped away and begged not to wake up again, the pain was too much to bear.

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***One week later...***

Shona and Kate laughed and talked as they dragged multiple shopping bags out of the taxi. Kate refused to allow Shona to carry anything so the journey to the door took forever as Kate - overloaded with bags - kept having to stop and jump around a bit to stop one or the other from slipping out her grasp.

Shona stood laughing at her and offered to help every time Kate stopped and was given a short, sharp "no" for her trouble. She helped the only way she could, she opened the door and sat waiting on Kate who - after a few minutes and a few hundred grunts and curses - finally made it through the door. Kate threw everything down in the hall, closed the door and started moving everything through to the sitting room in small bundles.

Eventually, they had everything in the sitting room and Kate sat down with an exaggerated sigh.

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"You could have at least offered to help."

"Uh-uh, I'm pregnant, that makes me an invalid," said Shona, sticking her tongue out and giggling. "What did you get anyway?"

"Well, Chris gave me some cash before he left and asked me to help get set up for the baby. That box there is the cot, that one is a walker, that one is a mobile and the rest of the bags are full of clothes and toys that were just too gorgeous not to buy." Kate gushed out, without taking a breath.

Shona felt exhausted just watching Kate enthusiastically describe the items.

"Right..." Kate rolled up her sleeves. "... let's get started shall we?"

She tore open the box for the crib, took one look at the instructions and turned to Shona.

"Can you read Craponese?" she said seriously.

"What?" Asked Shona, before she burst out laughing.

She turned back to the flat packed cot and looked at the bits and pieces, trying to reconcile the "English" instructions with the pieces in front of her.

"Ok," she said turning to Shona. "I am convinced that all the pieces of the cot are here, but these instructions are for building a fuckin' nuclear ICBM."

They both laughed again, and were interrupted by the doorbell.

Shona walked through to the hallway still giggling as she opened the front door. She turned to look at her visitors and her blood froze.

"No..." she whispered and backed away.

"Mrs McCall?" said the man standing on the left, wearing a dress uniform of the Parachute Regiment.

The other wore a Priest's collar.

"No, no, no..." was all she could manage as she moved back from the door.

"No!" She screamed as she turned away and tripped.

Kate came running into the hall as Shona screams and spots her sister-in-law in a heap on the floor as she marches to the door.

"What the fuck?"

"I'm sorry Miss... We are here because a..." he pauses to look at his clipboard, "... Sergeant McCall was injured and we were told this was his next-of-kin's home."

*"Instructions were left for you fuckers to contact..."*

"Kate?" Shona said quietly, her eyes widening in horror.

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*"... my mother before coming here to scare a heavily pregnant young wife..."*

"Kate?" She called a little louder this time.

*"... half to bloody death."*

"Kate!" Shona screams.

Kate turns, and sees Shona hold her hands up - a look of terror on her face - as blood dripped from them.

"... It's too soon, Kate, the baby is coming, and it's too soon."

She turned to the men, her brow furrowed in fear and fury.

"Phone a fuckin' ambulance you tosser. *Now!*"

## Chapter 13: The Homecoming

*Six weeks later...*

Chris straightened up as he stepped out of the taxi and instantly wished he hadn't, his left hand instinctively reaching across his body as his face grimaced with the burning pain in his right side.

Reaching in to the back of the car Chris grasped the strap of his Bergen and lifted it down to the pavement leaving it to rest as he paid the driver. The driver gave a respectful nod as the car reversed away, Chris now alone with just his thoughts for company.

Sighing - he looked around - it all seemed new - the houses strange but also familiar - the lack of colour disturbed him a little.

Men had fought, men had died, what irked him most was no one seemed to care. Where was his parade; the flag-waving propaganda-style shit? Instead he was greeted with silence.

*If it weren't for that poor wee bastard I'd not even have had thisâ* | Chris had to growl to stop his train of thought taking him down that despair-filled trail.

The continuing silence made him feel even more ill at ease, skin crawling as he tried to force his mind to adjust to being home.

*"What the ..."*

Spinning on his heel to face the source of the sudden silence shattering sound - his entire body tensed - ready to strike.

"Fuckin' cat." He cursed as the wave of relief surging through him almost caused him to faint.

Gritting his teeth, Chris made his way up the driveway towards the front door, slipped the key in to the lock with familiar ease. A half rotation of the wrist and the comforting click as the key did its job and the door opened, allowing him to slip inside and close it silently behind.

*"Chris!"* screamed his younger sister, Kate.

"Hiya," he replied, cringing, as her screech cut in to his mind like shrapnel through flesh.

"What's the damage?" She indicated to his side with a nod of her head.

"Jus' a scratch, no' quite dead yet." He glanced around distractedly, and a little bewildered. "Shona 'n' Mum no' about?"

"She's with mum, there's been a fuck up with the reception so mum went down to put on 'The Bitch Routine'"

"Put on?" Chris snorted brutally.

"Chris..." Kate's face burned red with indignation. "â 'Mum's been rock-solid for us these past weeks, everything here would be in pieces if it hadn't been for her."



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Exhaling slowly as he dropped his head, Chris regretted his comment.

"Sorry Kate, it's jus' weird bein' back."

"If you like, I can postpone the wedding, give you a chance to settle in."

The offer hung there as if suspended in mid-air between them. Chris could see she meant it butâ

"No - thank you - but no. I wouldn't miss my baby sister's weddin' and I know how much you've been lookin' forward to finally gettin' your claws in Allan."

Without raising his head he gave a wry smile, not quite able to bring himself to admit how much the thought of giving her away in his late father's stead had sustained him through the carnage in the Falklands.

"Three days, right?" He asked.

"Yup, you'll find your kilt in your room."

"Ta short-arse."

Kate cringed momentarily then chuckled at the irony of the nickname; they were the same height.

"I'll leave you in peace and will let mum know you're home."

With that she swept up her coat and bag in one graceful movement, leant to give him a kiss on the cheek before hugging him and disappearing out the door.

Chris suddenly realised he was exhausted; he hadn't noticed how bad it was until he tried forcing his legs to move. It felt like someone had tied a lorry to each calf and nailed his bag to the floor.

Eventually he made it to the staircase dragging the rucksack lethargically as he ascended. On the top landing a quick swing and throw of the pack - to launch it in to the bedroom without having to stop - was followed closely by curses as it turned one of the tables by the door into woodchip.

"Cheap shiteâ

He continued to mumble as he somehow managed to force his feet to move in the direction of the bathroom.

The water spluttered momentarily as he switched the shower on before settling to a steady hot flow. He stripped down leaving his clothes where they fell he eagerly anticipated his first proper shower in months relishing the moment as he stepped over the edge of the bath to stand in the warm embrace of the cascading water.

The shower re-vitalised him in a way he never believed possible and he towelled off in a relatively serene mood until the silence began to haunt him again, the quiet roared in his eardrums, after the splash and steady hum of the shower, the lack of noise made him uneasy once again. He quickly put on a fresh pair of shorts and brushing his teeth, he was relieved to finally leave the suffocating echoic silence now inhabiting the bathroom as he made his way through to the bedroom.

The fatigue returned as he hauled the bag away from the table - which was now no more than firewood - and began fumbling through it. Pulling a bottle of water out of the main compartment and after a little frustrated

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rummaging the painkillers were found, Chris dropped two of the prescription-only pills into his mouth and gulped back half the water. He lay down and felt like a king, the large duvet and comfortable pillows felt like heaven to someone who'd known only hard, cold ground, stretchers and hospital beds recently. Within five minutes he was out-for-the-count as the painkillers and warmth of the bed enveloped him in blissful rest.

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Awaking with a start Chris forced himself to focus on the bedside clock as he rubbed the gunk from his sleep-blurred eyes. 11 a.m. - he had been asleep 19 hours.

"Must've needed it," he mumbled, almost drunkenly.

Stretching carefully - so as not to restart the burning in his side - he sat up and slipped out from beneath the huge snug duvet. With just two steps bringing him to the window as he continued to wake up his muscles with involuntary stretches.

Opening the curtains Chris gazed absent-mindedly at the street beyond the glass. The right hand side of his body began to throb as the pain and his memory conspired against him, bringing the attack on Goose Green back to roaring, thundering, screaming life. Cringing, Chris tried to turn away from the pictures that had forced their way on to the movie player inside his head.

*Is this survivor's guilt?*

An audible rumble brought him back to reality.

*Must be a thunderstorm*, he thought. Then he heard it again.

"Thunderstorm." He said laughing at his idiocy; it was his stomach.

For the first time in recent recollection hunger gripped Chris and without thinking he found himself stood in front of the fridge, with no memory of having walked downstairs.

Even with the hum of the refrigerator the silence pulsed in his ears again and the strange feeling returned, leaving him shivering, as the room seemed to grow icy cold. His chest tightened and breaths shortened as he fought for air.

Is it guilt? Do I really regret surviving?

Chris chewed on his lip as he questioned his subconscious, wondering if the answers would ever come. His mind's eye continued to betray him by forcing the pictures through the mental roadblocks he attempted to raise in his mind.

"You ok?" The familiar voice cut through the silence and his thoughts making him jump.

"Aye, jus' some bad memories."

"I can imagineâ!" The voice replied.

*"How in the fuck can you imagine it? It's beyond my worst nightmares and I was there, so how the hell can you understand it?"*

The blazing fury in his eyes and suddenness of his rage startled Shona as she visibly recoiled from the

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outburst.

"Shitâ ! Shona, I'm sorryâ !"

He poured himself into a chair as the aggression in his eyes melted into exhausted anguish.

"â ! I jus' don't know what's wrong with me."

Gliding silently over to stand next to him, she pulled his head gently to rest against her now flat stomach.

"Oh Christ, where's the baby?"

A moment of panic drained the colour from his face as it gripped him, wrapping his mind with fear.

"Shush, your mum has her, said 'you need time to recover properly.' She'll drop the baby off a few days after the wedding."

With that Chris relaxed again and leaned into her warmth as she stroked his head in comfortable silence.

"I'm starving." He said to no one in particular.

She made to move towards the fridge but Chris shook his head.

"My injuries are mainly up here," he tapped his temple, "â !so sit on your arse 'n' I'll make somethin'."

## Chapter 14: The Morning of the Wedding

Waking up in a cold sweat Chris couldn't remember the dream he had but the dread shuddering down his spine gave a rough idea. He made his way out of bed, creeping down the staircase as quietly as possible to make straight for the kettle as quickly as he could. It had become an internal conflict; the urge to make straight for the whisky was gradually strengthening, his mind overcoming the craving - just barely, making him wonder how long that would last.

Coffee, coffee, coffee! He would force his mind to say and sometimes trace the words with his mouth in an attempt to blot out his body's continual insistence for alcohol.

It really didn't help that his sleep patterns were all over the place, the painkillers seeing to that. The yesterday he had stayed off the pills deliberately until it was time to sleep so he could be well rested for today. A quick look at the kitchen wall clock as the kettle boiled made him groan loudly - 6am - he had hours left before he could get ready. Grinning, he thought of one way to pass the time but dismissed the idea straightaway as he was in no fit state for the bedroom Olympics.

Picking up the now full mug of coffee he wandered through the hallway to the sitting room. The book on the table caught his eye and he smiled.

Charlotte's Web - Shona's favourite book, read it a million times and still she cries when that spider dies.

Chris chuckled loudly at the thought as he flicked through the well-thumbed pages and found the badly frayed bookmark.

Reading the page - blissfully unaware that he read it over and over and over again.

Right before they find out the spider died, he thought, no doubt the daft mare will cry 'bout it tomorrow.

Still smiling to himself he placed the book down and stepped to the TV to switch it on. The screen flickered for a bit before the image steadied and locked into place. The news program was showing yet more pictures from the Falklands, the top story still being the surrender of the Argentine forces in Port Stanley.

Sighing heavily Chris switched the television off; he'd heard enough about it over the past 24 hours. He was pleased it was over - his friends were still there after all - but the over excited patriotic coverage was pissing him off. Talking about the "military might of UK forces, superior training" etcetera.

The news came through yesterday afternoon as Chris and Shona sat on the couch watching some shite.

"Aye a chivalric jolly good ruck in the mud - what - what." Chris had commented bitterly as the reporter beamed and gushed superlatives. "Not so fuckin' neutral now are ye dickhead?"

Shona tried to stifle the laugh as her husband bandied words with the screen.

"Do you know it was that twat who announced to the fuckin' Argies that we were attacking Goose Green - before it had even started? Cunt!" He continued venting his spleen, and Shona couldn't help but giggle at the outpouring anger and expletives in his comically harsh tone.

He had to laugh; it wasn't funny at the time but he could now see why she found it so funny. Taking a look around the room he remembered the past couple of days, so much peace and quiet. No visitors with their

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bullshit reasons for coming to see the wounded soldier - thank fuck - only his mother had phoned to tell him the car would pick him up today at 11am.

Smiling again; his mother and Shona had always had an aura of cool hostility toward one another, it never boiled over in to anything major, they just regarded each other with a degree of casual indifference. Switching the TV back on he sat on the settee to watch the cartoons that had now replaced the news on the brain rot box.

Suddenly the wound burning flared up in his side as the smell of explosives drifted to his nostrils, he could taste the iron tang of blood - feeling like his mouth was flooding with it.

"Shit, not again, shit, no, please, no." He pleaded weakly.

His vision blurred then went black, as if he was back in the pure darkness of the South Atlantic Islands. Leaning forward - head between his knees as he tried to ride out the flashback. The air cracked all around him as imaginary bullets whipped by, the grunts of the living and screams of the wounded filled his head. The film continued to play on the cinema screen in his mind - nothing could stop it at it's worst.

The lad's face appeared again, contorted in the agony of having his skin instantly incinerated whilst conscious, the eyes were full of accusation. The boy was in front; Chris had put him there. Why did you put him there? He whimpered to himself. The apparition spoke directly to his mind.

It should have been you.

Shut up!

You should have been cooked alive.

Shut up!

Why did he die and you survived?

"Shut up!" Chris sprang to his feet yelling and flailing at the phantom haunting his mind.

The sweat dripped from his body, covering him in a damp layer of moisture. He slumped back down to his previous sitting position, eyes screwed tightly shut. The room grew cold and he shivered, tears streaming down his cheeks as the torturous visions fought to re-establish dominance in his mind.

From nowhere he felt arms encircle him, clenching his teeth and tensing his muscles he braced as he waited for the arms to pull back in to the midst of his terror.

However, the visions gradually faded away and the arms brought secure warmth to his body and haunted mind. He fell backwards against the source of the heat, emotionally drained and utterly exhausted.

Shona heard the shout, jumping instantly to consciousness and stumbled for the sitting room.

The sight she met with upon arrival chilled her to the bone; her husband sat on the floor, head between his knees, sweat pouring off him as he mumbled and plead with some unseen spectre from his imagination.

She could hear the absolute fear and anguish in his voice as he begged for peace. Swiftly she stepped over beside him, brushing against him as she slipped down, sitting herself between the couch and Chris' hunched back. No acknowledgement of her presence came from him, still unaware of anyone else.

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The begging continued.

With no idea how to help she passed her left arm under his - placing it across his lower chest, at the same time she thread her right arm over his right shoulder to meet the other loosely around her husband's trunk.

Leaning back to have the support of the settee on her back Shona closed her hug and held him tightly.

"I love you," she whispered tearfully, "I love you," she whispered continually in to his ear.

Gradually the sobbing and mumbling subsided and he sat back against her completely shattered. He lost consciousness as she continued holding him. His last thoughts were of the heavenly warmth and that she had saved him from his treacherous memories. He slept peacefully, no dreams, no accusing ghosts, no pictures.

After a short while he began to come round again.

"What's th' time?" Chris asked groggily.

Shona shushed him gently as she stroked his head, relief surging through her; glad he had come through the ordeal.

"â I need to get ready for eleven, the car is comin' for me."

"I know, it's half nine, you can sit for half an hour and still be ready in plenty o' time."

"OK."

He was relieved at the extra time; his legs still shivered and he wasn't sure if he could make them work yet. The time passed slowly; almost as if they were wrapped in some bubble exempt from the passing of time. Chris couldn't remember the last time he felt so safe, so relaxed and so calm.

What seemed like bliss-filled eternity had passed when he eventually felt Shona nudge his back gently.

"That's timeâ !" She whispered. "â IGo get showered and dressed and Iâ !" She leaned in, kissing his forehead. "â Iwill see you at the ceremony."

Smiling as he turned to look deep in her intelligent loving eyes, for the first time in recent memory he felt hope surge through him.

Chris raised himself up slowly, almost slipping as the sweat acted like lubricant on the smooth glass of the coffee table he used for leverage. Swaying slightly as he straightened up, he steadied himself before marching off towards the bathroom upstairs.

The car arrived at 11a.m.on the button to pick Chris up. Opening the door he slid in to the back seat as he used one hand to hold the large fuzzy sporran in place.

He wore the Hunting Stewart tartan today, he had wanted to wear the family tartan but his sister said it would "clash" with the bridesmaids. His reply at the time had been "I didn't realise they'd be wearing kilts too."

Chris chuckled as he remembered the look of thunder that had crossed her face - never ever wind up a woman when she's pregnant or planning a wedding, I'd rather face the Argie machine guns again than risk that - he thought as the houses whipped by the car window.

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He had been so lost in his thoughts he didn't realise when they arrived at his sister's house.

"Oi, mate." Chris jumped at the verbal nudge from the driver.

"Sorry â Cheers."

He grinned sheepishly at the driver as he slid out of the Rolls Royce, his thoughts turned to what kind of chaos he was just about to walk in to. Hesitating momentarily as his hand reached for the door handle. He adjusted the tartan sash hanging from his shoulder, took a few deep breaths before tightening the grip of the handle to open the door and step over the threshold.

Upon entering the sitting room, Chris gazed round at the destruction; brushes; clothes - including underwear - seemingly discarded at will; make-up of all types and colours; bits of tissue (no doubt at least one of the bridal party was an emotional wreck); breakfast had been a fry-up that no one had yet deemed edible.

"The Falklands was less carnage than this!"

"Should have seen Shona's."

He turned and smiled, his mother - as was her usual - looked unruffled, she probably kept them on track with her Sergeant Major-like haranguing.

Chris could picture it; Joyce in army fatigues on the parade groundâ

"Get your fuckin' arse in that dressâ Oi Dickhead - put down the suspenders and get a fuckin' bra on."

He couldn't suppress the laugh which inevitably followed the mental pictures, she'd make a better officer than some of the knob ends currently in the job, he thought as the bitterness edged its way in too.

"Mum, Chris here yet?" asked a voice from the hallway.

Stepping out of the living room he saw his older sister - Margaret - she started towards him but then hesitated.

"What's wrong Mags?"

She bit her lower lip, one eyebrow raised and her eyes seemed to be filling with moisture.

"A-a-are you OK?" Eventually the words stammered from her mouth.

Nodding he threw his arms open. "Come give me a hug."

Stepping forward she embraced him for a moment.

"You look beautiful, how's Kate? I've seen the devastation through there." He indicated the living room with a deft flick of his head.

"You should see herâ!" Margaret's mouth dropped open to emphasise her amazement. "âShe looks like a true princess."

Just then a creaking floorboard upstairs indicated the progress of Chris' younger sister. Looking up he caught

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sight of Kate at the top of stairs.

"My Godâ!"

Chris' jaw dropped open as Kate started to make her way downstairs - carefully. The three people standing in the hall followed her progress with their eyes.

"â!Sis' - you look - Jesâ! - Wow!"

She blushed slightly and grinned back as she concentrated on not tripping.

Regaining his composure her brother offered his arm for balance as she negotiated the last few steps.

The two bridesmaids still upstairs put in an appearance and everyone stepped outside and made for the cars, Chris escorting his sister in his role as surrogate father for the day.



## Chapter 15: The Ceremony

Kate looked terrified as the car pulled up outside the church. The rest of the bridal party - including his mother - jumped out of the cars and slowly made their way towards the main door.

"You ok?" asked Chris after a few moments of nervous silence.

She shrugged without taking her eyes off of the large - now intimidating - church.

"Do you regret getting married?"

"No; I love Shona."

A look of sadness crossed her face for a moment and then it was gone.

"I keep thinkin'!" Kate stopped, unsure whether to give a voice to her fears.

"That he's not as interested in this wedding as you are?" Chris finished for her.

Her mouth flapped open as her brother showed more perception than she had ever given him credit for.

He grinned at her perplexed look. Shona told me after our wedding that she had wondered the same thing."

His smile widened.

"I'll tell you what her dad told her in the car and I confirmed afterwards."

She leaned forward, now intrigued.

"Men don't really care how, where or what they wear when they get married. If they've made the decision to throw away their freedom then you can bet he's agonised over it for days, maybe even months, and eventually decided that the good far outweighed the bad. You with me so far?"

She nodded slowly.

"He may not seem all that interested in it when there's choices, bookings, organising and lists to be done - probably because he isn't. It's all for you. The dresses; bridesmaids; church; reception; flowers; cars; guests; photographs - everything, it's all for you. Whatever puts that smile on your face is what makes him happy. So yes, chances are he couldn't give a flyin' fuck about the wedding as a whole - I know I didn't - he still loves you and still wants to spend the rest of his life with you. Ask him, he'll tell you he'd marry you, even if you were both dressed in bin bags and had the local jakey perform the ceremony on a railroad track."

Stunned, Kate sat back, processing what her brother had said, slowly it all made sense and her eyes began to shine brightly in the dull light of the car.

"Don't - you'll ruin the make-up."

She smiled as he handed over a tissue to soak up any rogue tears.

"You ready then Mrs Gordon?"

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Kate nodded again as she dabbed at her eyes carefully so as not to smudge anything. Chris opened the door and stepped out - taking a moment to straighten up his kilt and adjust the sporran. He offered his free hand to his sister to help her out the car. Brushing down her dress she straightened to her full height as Chris closed the car door.

"Which side should I walk on?"

"It's your wedding so whichever you like."

"I'll take the left then."

He gave an inward sigh of relief as she chose the uninjured side, he would have borne the pain but couldn't be certain of triggering a flashback or not.

They reached the door and the bridesmaids fell in behind as the organist kicked off their own rendition of "Here Comes the Bride." The doors opened wide, Kate nudged her brother gently to show she was ready.

Brother led sister up the aisle at a measured pace as they made their way to the altar and the stunned-looking groom before it. The women amongst the guests gushed at the bride and the men - those not related to her - nodded approvingly at the sheer luck of the groom.

Without realising it Chris was stroking his sister's arm as they walked, it seemed to have a calming effect on her and she knew in her mind she was doing the right thing for her.

"Thank youâ!" She mimed silently to the effigy of Jesus in front. "Thank you for bringing him home."

"Did you say somethin'?" Chris somehow managed to ask without moving his lips.

"I was thinking out loud; you'd make a great ventriloquist when you get out the army."

She felt him chuckle without one hint of it on his face.

"That must be giving you face ache by now." Kate jibed.

"You have no idea, I've never smiled so much in my life." Again his face stayed set like concrete in a wide grin.

Unfortunately the wrong place - wrong time banter came to an end as they approached the altar. Chris completed his duty by "giving" his sister over to her soon-to-be husband, and then turning away he strode to the front row - bride side.

Feeling something squeeze his arm and snuggle in next to him, he smiled, squeezing back but still watching the ceremony.

"She looks amazing."

He squeezed Shona's arm in response but didn't speak and she huddled in closer to watch, as the sermon got under way.

Chris only heard intermitting parts of the service as he drifted to and fro from "Planet Chris" - that weird and wonderful place he can never describe to anyone despite the many visits.

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Shona's attention was glued to the proceedings and had already guessed her husband's eyes were probably glazed over as he nursed dreams of the drink at the party afterwards.

"Typical." She laughed quietly.

Maybe he just needs a good night out and he'll be fine, she thought. I really hope that's true.

The sermon dragged on for what seemed like eternity to Chris and he had to fight to stay awake. Every so often a helpful elbow to the ribs would jolt him awake to start the whole process again.

Finally! It was over.

Chris hauled himself to his feet with a rather too obvious groan and stretch. Joyce gave "the look" - that look that could turn a child to stone and often did when he was young enough to care. Now he just grinned and shrugged.

Everyone slowly filed towards the main doors as they waited patiently to get outside. All wanted to see the photos and the traditional blind-the-bride with confetti or for the cheapskates - rice.

Another barely muffled yawn informed everyone within earshot that Chris was bored with waiting. So, knowing the church layout from his own wedding held there he spun on his heel and clopped his way back up towards the altar, veered left and disappeared out one of the slightly hidden side doors. Others soon had the same idea and followed, clogging that exit also.

Sucking in some deep breaths to clear the stagnant church air from his lungs seemed to re-vitalise him as he looked around.

An unseen force made him shudder, as the air around him seemed to turn icy cold. Severe pins-and-needles spread throughout his body causing him to gasp in pain.

"Fuck, no - please - not now - not now!"

His head spun relentlessly, the dizziness overpowering his willpower and an overwhelming urge to vomit hit him like a brick wall as pictures of dead and injured men filled his mind.

A giggle brought him spinning around in time to catch a glimpse of black, as Shona seemed to almost glide towards him.

His legs gave way but with a wiry strength that belied her stature, she held him up. Guiding him to one of the benches in the church garden she wrapped her slender arms around his neck and brought his head down to rest on her chest.

Once again that heavenly warmth seemed to pull him back from the darkest recesses of his mind and the visions gradually passed, his body relaxing. She had done it again.

"We should get round for the pictures."

Chris could only nod as he tried to catch his breath.

The photographer was finishing setting up as everyone who was staying to watch finally squeezed out of the church. Others made straight for their cars or taxis to head to the reception. The majority of those who would

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be in the photos would no doubt have it taken with their shut as the completely unnecessary flash temporarily robs them of sight.

"Chris - Chris - Chris."

He looked around and eventually spotted his elder sister waving him over to the bridal party.

"Come on, stand next to Kate for the pictures."

"I can't." He whispered.

"Don't be daft, its just a picture, hardly goin' t' steal your soul is it?" She rubbed her hands together and laughed maniacally in an attempt to be funny.

Chris wasn't amused.

Leaning in close, he looked around to make sure no one was within earshot. "I've been havin' flashbacks 'n' that fuckin' flash is a sure way to trigger one."

Margaret moved back, searching his eyes for a sign that he was kidding. "Sorry I didn't know."

"It's not somethin' am keen on broadcasting."

Turning to face the photographer she bobbed her head in acknowledgement, biting her lip as she thought about a solution.

"Hello, photo-man, oi, yesâ I mean you, the one with the fuckin' camera."

Margaret and the photographer whispered suspiciously for a few moments before he called to his assistants and she made her way back to her brother.

"Sorted!" She said lightly whilst looping her arm through his to act as escort to where everyone stood ready to pose. Chris shuffled in to place between Kate and her new husband on the church steps and the next few photos were taken without a blind-the-bastard flash.

Next the couple prepared to run the gauntlet of well-wishers trying to drown them in paper. As they waited Chris was in no doubt that more than one sarcastic cheapskate would be preparing to throw the contents of an out-of-date pack of Uncle Ben's they'd dug out of the cupboard, it had happened to him and Shona on their wedding day.

Took fuckin' ages to get that one bit out of ma kilt, he thought. One grain of rice had slipped sown his back and buried itself in some previously unexplored body part, meaning he had spent twenty minutes in the loo stripping just to get at it.

His sister raced by and as predicted Chris heard the rattle as the rice cracked down in showers upon their heads. Clenching his fists in irritation he turned and made for the remaining wedding car to head for the reception.

## Chapter 16: The Reception

The meal passed without any complaints, three courses cooked by the best chef in the area, the meal was so rich and tasty Chris couldn't help but overindulge on the stacked plates the waiting staff so kindly brought him. Compared to army rations and the cardboard-related hospital meals the food tonight had been divine.

The cheesy DJ kicked off the drinking and "proper-party" segment with the first dance for the groom and his bride. The waltz record he played sounded rather tinny; as if it had been recorded in the days of the Industrial Revolution.

Despite the bad music his sister seemed to enjoy herself as her husband led her through a traditional Waltz - he had secretly learned the dance especially for this moment. Other dancers joined in halfway through the never-ending track, the groomsmen pairing off with the bridesmaids and other guests taking what they could get.

Chris sought his seat as the first dance finally ended only for him to be immediately hijacked by his mother who pointed to Kate. Without a word he turned and trudged across the dance floor, dodging the spinning and flailing dancers automatically.

The bride and groom had sat down for the moment and Chris approached their table as they stood up smiling.

"The ceremony was lovely - you look the dream couple - the vows were so moving!" He gushed a few more bullshit superlatives and a comment or two, doing what was expected as he shook Allan's hand and kissed his sister on the cheek.

The other two just looked at one another strangely - before bursting in to fits of laughter.

"Which part was your favourite?" asked Kate trying to keep a straight face.

"The end?" Allan cut in, to both their further amusement.

Chris stood there - confused.

Kate leaned in. "You snore loudly, big brother."

His face flushed all shades of crimson but luckily in the dim light of the hall no one else could see it. It hadn't escaped their attention that Chris had skipped the boring parts, chuckling he managed a sorrowful grin.

"Nice one mate! To be honest, I'd have done the same at any other wedding." Allan said with a cheek-splitting smile.

Kate forced an over exaggerated look of shock as she nudged her new husband in the ribs, causing him to suck in air sharply mid-laugh.

"May I?" An open hand stretched to his sister but he looked at Allan whom he had directed the question to.

"Hell no," the man's face-hardened for a moment before his amused look returned. "Of course mate, I think there's a monster-in-law around here who requires taming, and me with only a Sgian Dhubh to hand."

All three giggled and Allan walked off in search of the beast - Kate gazing lovingly after him before turning

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back and leading her brother to dance.

"Wellâ "!"

"Well what?" She asked evasively.

"Still worried?"

"Do I look it?"

"You lookâ "!" Hesitating - Chris narrowed his eyes as he scrutinised her for a moment and tried to think of an effective way to describe what he could plainly see in her eyes. "Extremely happy."

A lone tear trickled down cheek as she returned her brother's assessing gaze.

"Very, very, very happy."

Chris gave another intent look; she was hiding something.

"You're pregnant!" He blurted in that way you do when a realization hits you like an articulated lorry.

"Shut up." She half-hissed.

"How far gone?" He asked; voice lowered this time.

"Found out this morning, mum doesn't even know so how the fuck did you figure it out?"

A tear, one of joy, dropped from Chris' eye this time as he pulled her close for a congratulatory hug.

"How have you been today?" Kate asked, as she grew a little concerned.

"Fine, brought back memories of my wedding."

"So you coped ok?"

"Yeahâ "!" He replied heavily. "I'm fine, but I'm gettin' tired out, you know all this dancin' 'n' prancin' takes it out of you."

Chris looked around and caught sight of Allan's dad waiting nearby.

"It looks like someone wants to dance with his new daughter." Motioning the father-in-law to come over, Chris bid his sister goodnight just in case she didn't have time later.

At last he could be alone; with his thoughts and his wife.

\*\*\*\*\*

They sat watching everyone dancing as jumpy pop tune followed golden oldie; neither felt well enough to join in and both were happy enough just to see the enjoyment of others.

"Look at her," Chris beamed as he watched his sister tirelessly dancing. "She looks so happy."

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"Aye, so she should, the ceremony was beautiful," answered Shona as she wiped her eyes to stop herself crying again.

"Can't believe I'm here, I-I-I thought I wouldn't make it."

His wife huddled in closer stroking his neck in the way that always soothed him, the worry lifted a little. She turned facing away from him and sank backwards in to his embrace returning to her people watching.

"Fuck!" Chris swore quietly as his side began burning.

"Your side?"

"Yep, it wouldn't be so bad if it were just the pain but -" His voice tailed off as he refused to dump more of his troubles on her.

"What?" Her eyes shone with concern and his resolve slowly buckled.

Sighing - in resignation - he returned the look with his own tormented gaze.

"Every time the pain comes it triggers," his side throbbed again making him gasp unexpectedly. "âOther stuff."

A grimace spread across his face as the agony surged again.

"I can smell the cordite; hear the injured scream; see the muzzle flash from the gun nests; I can taste blood - my blood or some poor bastard's - I'm not entirely sure."

Chris shook his head side-to-side as if trying to physically pour the memories out through his ears. She watched him; head tilted slightly as she waited for her husband to continue. After a few moments she realised he was lost in his memories and turned back to watch the dancing.

"Sorry." He spoke drifting back from where his mind had wandered.

Just then his mother, Joyce, made her way off the dance floor toward the seating area. Chris smiled; without looking he could guess Shona would be glaring in his mother's direction.

"Be nice." He whispered, laughingly, in her ear.

She shrugged and Chris chuckled knowing full well she'd still be giving the daggers.

## Chapter 17: The Mother in Law

Joyce began tiring so decided to sit herself down, despite the pleading of her dance partner, she excused herself and left the dance floor. She passed by Chris' table and noticed he was smiling and her expression flickered for a moment before she carried on towards her seat.â ©â ©

"Oh my feet," complained Joyce as she slumped heavily into the chair. â ©â ©

Her gaze once again came to rest on her son, her mood darkening as she noticed he was still acting strangely. He had been through a lot recently and she knew that but he seemed to be coping well - too well - which worried her more and more each day.â ©â ©She sat there watching his mouth open and close but his face gave nothing away.â ©â ©

"I'll speak to him tomorrow," she decided loudly.â ©â ©

A quick sip of her drink and then she leaned back, sinking gratefully on to the cushion, and realised she was still watching her son as his mouth continued to move; shaping the words he spoke. Joyce raised an eyebrow as she felt a twinge of sadness and almost dropped the heartless facade she always wore. Exhaling heavily she heaved herself up and made her way to the bar.â ©â ©

There was a queue so Joyce leaned herself against the dark oak bar and waited for her turn to order. â ©â ©

"... Ahh my favourite customer," the barman grinned cheekily.â ©â ©

"... It's a free bar so I'm the only customer," she smiled coldly. "... two double-vodka and cokes please."â ©â ©The man smiled as he poured her drinks and then brought them to her.

Joyce nodded her thanks and walked back to her table and - thankfully - her seat.â ©â ©

Despite what people thought of her, she didn't grudge using her late husband's money for anything, especially for her children's weddings. Her husband had always been generous and open-hearted, becoming instant friends with most people he met. He had left her comfortably off when he passed away, thanks to the businesses he had built up after leaving the forces. Losing him had robbed her of half her heart and she had closed off that empty part of herself, becoming the heartless automaton people saw her as now.â ©â ©

"... Bloody shoes. I knew I should've worn flats today." She fussed over her tender feet and more time passed than she realised.

Gradually more and more people began to return to their seats until only the drunken diehards remained on their blister-proof feet. Most seemed to be avoiding Chris - Joyce noticed grimly - as if his pain were contagious. This forced her hand as she grimaced and braced for the pain as she rolled herself on to her pressure-sensitive feet, doing her level-best to hide the severe pain from anyone who might see.â ©â ©It took a moment or two to regain her poise, then she strode purposefully towards her son.â ©â ©

"Hiya darlin'," she said in a quiet, concerned voice.â ©â ©

"Hey mum, lovely day wasn't it?" he chirped in reply.â ©â ©

"Yes it was - can I have a word?"â ©â ©He nodded and seemed to push at something as he sat up in expectation.â ©â ©



## Casualty of Conflict

"I've been worried about you, Chris. You seem strangely ok with everything that's happened, are you sure you are coping?"

"Aye, of course, why?"

"Who were you talking to a little while ago?" Joyce asked tentatively.

He seemed perplexed by the question and looked around him for a moment. "What do you mean who?"

"I was watchin' you as I returned to my seat; you were talkin'."

"Oh," the penny dropped, "I was talkin' to Shona - you know - my wife," he answered sarcastically, thinking this hostility had gone on long enough.

Joyce ruthlessly suppressed the rising emotion in her chest - she forced herself to continue as Chris looked angry.

"Do you remember when I visited you in the military hospital?"

A lone tear escaped through her armoured expression and made its way down her weathered face.

"Vaguely..." Chris answered warily and wondered where she was going with this.

She choked back a sob, the words caught in her throat, she reached over and grasped his hand. "Son, Shona died."

His mouth fell open in horror, confusion and sheer disbelief as the words reran in his mind. Joyce watched in despair as her son's heart visibly broke in front of her - for the second time.

He shook his head in denial, his chest felt as if someone had punched a hole the size of his head through it. He struggled to breathe and his mind reeled.

Then the memories came flooding back, he saw himself in hospital, he saw his mother and sister in tears and heard the words:

"... Died in childbirth." In his fragile, drugged state his mind had shut down, hadn't completely registered the loss of his wife. It had shut it all out, even the desperate emptiness that now returned with vengeance.

"Name the baby after her mother," he mumbled the words - the only words he had said that day.

The grief overwhelmed him, breaking through the walls to the closed off memories and bringing his pain into the cold light of day, that, is when the tears came.

## Chapter 18: Epilogue

Chris sat on the park bench, leaning his elbows on the picnic table as he watched the group of children running and screaming happily. He found himself smiling as his eyes followed the group around the play area.

It had taken months for him to forgive the men who had triggered his wife's fatal early labour and he had approached them both separately at the Para's base letting them know. They had seemed genuinely relieved that he no longer held them responsible and both had taken the time to talk to him and thanked him for forgiving them, but both would never forget the part they had played in Shona's death.

That had been 5 years ago. Two years after Shona's passing, Chris had left the army, they had arranged for him to take a course in programming and once completed, he was able to get a job working freelance from home. His army pension would kick in next year and along with his earnings, they would both be well set up for a long time.

He continued to watch the children but focussed on one in particular; a brown haired, gangly but pretty little girl - his own daughter. *So much like her mother*, he thought as she ordered some of her friends to go hide.

He couldn't help but smile as she turned and waved excitedly at him. Waving back, he checked his watch. *She deserves an extra ten minutes...*

The ten minutes passed quickly by and he stood up, dusted off some wood dust and stretched his legs. His little girl - his entire world - came running over, she knew he always gave her more time than she asked for at the trips to the park so as an unspoken agreement, she never complained when it was time to go.

She waved to her friends and walked away skipping as she slipped her tiny hand into her father's.

"So gorgeous, what would you like for dinner today?" he asked.

"Ummm, fish fingers?"

Chris rolled his eyes. "...but you had fish fingers, yesterday and the day before that, *and* the day before that as well."

"I like 'em," she replied simply as she skipped along the path at his side.

Just then a woman came around the corner carrying a bunch of shopping bags and holding a dog leash as well. Just then, a squirrel darted across her path and the dog shot off after it. Unfortunately for woman, the leash had become wrapped around her leg and she was subsequently pulled off her feet.

"Oh my God," Shona said in her comically high voice as she ran off in the same direction as the dog.

Chris jogged over to the woman.

"Are you Ok?" he asked offering her a hand as she looked at him dazedly.

"I think so," She replies as she rubbed the back of her head and winced, "but my dog..."

"My daughter is off like a whippet after him, she'll be back shortly," Chris said confidently.

## Casualty of Conflict

"He's a bloody minded dog and I doubt she'll be able to make him come back."

"She will," he said as he smiled, "your dog may be bloody minded, but my daughter is a force of nature."

Moments later, Chris was proven right as his daughter came back into view with the dog following eagerly at her heel. He turned and grinned to the woman.

"Told you."

"Yep, you did," she said as she pushed herself to her feet and gathered her bags again.

"Here, give me those," he said as he took a large bunch of the bags off her effortlessly.

"*Sit.*" Shona said sternly to the dog and simultaneously announced her return.

Chris was almost tempted to obey, he realised with amusement. The dog sat, happily looking from his owner to his new friends and back again. The woman smiled and patted the dog's head.

"I can never bring myself to admonish him for misbehavin'."

Shona turned and looked puzzled as she spotted her dad carrying half the woman's bags. "We will be helping this lady home with her stuff, and then we'll go get dinner after."

She nodded, gave a gap toothed smile and turned to the woman. "Hiya, can I hold the leash?"

"Well, he seems to like you, so of course you can."

His daughter clapped excitedly and regained possession of the lead.

"What way?" She asked abruptly.

"That way, my house is the one on the end, just across from the park," the woman said as she pointed back the way Chris and Shona had just come from.

"*Up. Heel!*" Shona ordered and began to walk off in the direction indicated.

Chris nodded and turned to begin the walk, the young woman quickly stepped into stride alongside him. They continued in awkward silence until they reached the woman's front door.

After she got the bags inside she returned and leaned down to hand something to Shona.

"What's this?" The little girl said.

"Well, you helped me and you deserve a reward for it."

Shona looked at her dad then back to the woman her face creased in that childish way that indicated she was concentrating or didn't like something. "No thanks," she said and handed the bag of sweets back to the woman and her voice dropped to a whisper, "Us superheroes don't need a reward." Then she winked, touched her nose with her index finger and shushed the woman.

## Casualty of Conflict

Chris burst out laughing, followed closely by the woman and Shona just frowned, put her hands on her hips and pouted. She then smiled beatifically and began to giggle as well.

She stopped suddenly, her face creased in concentration again as she looked at her dad then the woman, then back again.

"... do you have a boyfriend?" she blurted at the woman.

The woman blushed, "no," she replied wishing the earth would swallow her up.

"My dad's single," she smiled and then her mouth made an "oh" shape, as if she had just been struck by an idea, "Dad, come here."

Chris leaned down, "What?"

Shona stretched up to his ear and cupped her hands then whispered into his ear. He stood up straight and blushed as he looked at the woman; Shona continued to beam widely at them both.

"What did she say?" The woman asked, worriedly.

"She said..." he coughs from embarrassment, "... that this is the point where I give you my phone number."

The woman laughs and Chris looked uncomfortable as he shifted from foot to foot, praying he'd be hit by a freak meteor or something to end this embarrassing matchmaking session of his daughter's concoction.

"I'm Shawna," she said reaching to shake his hand.

"Dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, *dad*." Shona continued on trying to get his attention.

"I know, I know. " He replied, "I'm Chris, and this is Shona." He said introducing himself and his wayward daughter.

The little girl made an elaborate twirl and bowed on the spot. "... Charmed I'm sure," she said in an impossibly deep voice causing all three to laugh.

Chris took a deep breath, "So, would you like that number, so we could, umm, maybe go out, err, sometime for a meal or a drink?" he asked nervously; asking for the first time since he had lost his wife.

"I can look after your dog for you when you go." Shona chimed in, helpfully.

The woman smiled, "How could I turn down such an offer. Maybe you can teach me *how* you make that bloody dog do as you say."

She quickly wrote down her number on a scrap bit of paper and handed it to Chris and he did the same. "Call me anytime. I'd love to see you both again."

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as she kissed his cheek and thanked him for the help. Shawna then stuck her tongue out at Shona who responded in kind whilst she giggled and then the woman was gone into her house.

## Casualty of Conflict

"*Dad* it's time to go, duh. Dinner time," Shona intoned as she grabbed Chris' hand and dragged him in the direction of home.

She began to sing and Chris had to strain to hear the song as she chirped it out under her breath:

*"Daddy has a date - daddy has a date - daddy has a date,"* then followed by a loud deep breath as she skipped along, *"Daddy has a date - daddy has a date..."*

## Chapter 19: Author's Note

### Author's Note

Ok to begin I would like to thank everyone who has helped me with this novel. First kudos go to Kenny, Bekki, Becca, Jess and others from Booksie.com - your comments and encouragement has and continues to be a source of real motivation for me and those random conversations on facebook that often have nothing to do with writing, for all of which, I thank you.

Also a special thanks should go to Mickey, also on Booksie, whose unique brand of encouragement - bordering on hourly harassment - was the main motivator to me actually finishing this novel which had sat without updated for a long time until she came onto the scene. I also appreciate the long conversations we've had which have prevented me from floating off to "the land of Michael" as I have so often done in the past during periods of writing. This was important as it allowed my normal life to function in and around the writing and meant I still got other things done. So a massive thank you for all of that.

Now, on to the story:

This is fiction; the people for the most part are not real. The Lance Corporal and Private, who charged the machine guns, were real and I used their real names, although this may change in a redraft, but I believe what they did - charging a machine gun nest just to give their mates a fighting chance - was one of the prime examples of selfless bravery in the conflict. The CO of 2Para, known here as "H", was also real and although he and his actions do have their critics, I am not one; he gave his life to try to overturn a situation created by a monumental intelligence cock-up which, in any other circumstance, would have gotten a lot more men killed. His sacrifice gave "A" company the drive and inspiration to push on - without any full artillery support (deemed as not being required thanks to "intelligence" reports) - and take the positions at "Darwin Hill."

Anyone who does more than a cursory bit of research into this will probably spot that I have placed Chris into "B" Company of the 2Para contingent, however, "B" Company were not involved in the airfield ambush, nor were they directly involved in the assault on the school house at the edge of the Goose Green settlement.

After taking "Boca Hill" (also known as "Boca House ruins"), "B" Company were air-lifted to the west of Goose Green in what is known as a "spoiler" move. Basically they were sent there to pre-empt any attempt by the enemy to break out of the settlement and head east as the rest of 2Para moved in for the kill.

The ambush at the airfield involved "D" Company and it was a Platoon Sergeant who charged the ambush parties firing his machine gun and killing a few. His company were then able to advance steadily and eventually take the airfield.

"A" Company took over the positions on "Darwin Hill" and it was "C" Company who were involved in the attack on the house. The incident mentioned about the Lieutenant being killed when heading to take the enemy surrender has become known as "the White Flag incident." The enemy had opted to surrender to the approaching forces and as the Lieutenant and another soldier walked up towards the school, "A" Company opened fire in the belief that they were to support another assault. As a result the enemy fired and killed both men. The air attack I have mentioned in the book did not happen; I have taken a fair bit of dramatic license as I found in-depth details about each engagement difficult to come by with my resources. There was, however, an air attack during the assault on the school house. "C" Company had received a warning that Harriers were on their way for an air strike on the building. They held back but were alarmed when the incoming aircraft turned out to be a mixture of different enemy aircraft, including around 4 Pucara ground attack aircraft.

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They did manage to shoot down approx 4 of the 6 aircraft attacking them and drove the rest off, all with small arms fire.

The school house was destroyed shortly after by a Harrier strike and 2Para dug in.

The new Commanding Officer - Major Chris Keeble - with some help from a BBC reporter drafted a letter for the head of the Argentine forces in Goose Green. In the letter he gave them the option of surrendering honourably or he bombard the settlement and the Argentineans would be held responsible for any civilian casualties. This to me was genius as the next morning the Argentine commanders met the Major and they surrendered.

The men of 2Para were shocked when it became clear they had defeated a force around twice their own numbers marched out of Goose Green and threw down their weapons. Overall, roughly 1500 prisoners were taken in the whole attack on the settlement and areas surrounding it. Roughly 55 Argentine men were recorded as having been killed and under a hundred wounded. The British on the other hand lost fifteen Paratroopers killed - one from the Royal Engineers and a Royal Marine Pilot; shot down whilst heading to try to uplift "H" after he had been hit. Thirty-seven Para's were injured and no one in any of the settlements was killed or injured.

The "BBC Incident" which is mentioned in part later in this novel actually occurred. During planning the assault, "HQ" company were listening to the BBC World Service and heard an announcement stating 2Para were poised to attack Goose Green. "Lieutenant Colonel Jones became furious with the level of incompetence and told BBC representative Robert Fox he was going to sue the BBC, Whitehall and the War Cabinet."

## Casualty of Conflict

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