

Opening extract from
Lighter Than Air

Written by
Susan Pope

Published by
Vanguard Press

All text is copyright of the author and / or the illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

PROLOGUE
JONNO'S DREAM

Romney Marsh, Kent. March 1980

He was still half asleep. In this hypnotic state, when the window to his subconscious remained open, he dreamed. To the eight-year-old boy, the gigantic vessel in which he floated was a vast space ship for intergalactic travel. He was on a wonderful journey when inexplicably the ship was instantly engulfed in flames. The beautiful dream disintegrated as he was plunged into a dark void.

He awoke with a sense of loss he could not comprehend, then, terror subsiding, lowered the sheet gripped tightly over his head. The horrible images had evaporated but the pungent, acrid smell had not. He flicked on the lamp, and saw tiny curls of smoke creep under the door. Now his purpose was clear. This time he must rescue everyone and redeem himself; heroes did not have bad dreams.

Jonno did not panic. He scooped up his treasured divers watch and as he put it on, the lamp flickered and went out. He reached for his torch, and then remembered the game from the previous night. It had been his searchlight; the moths and mosquitoes were the enemy aircraft. He had downed ten fighters and two bombers before the batteries died.

Without the torch, he would have to follow the blueprint in his mind. He dropped to his knees and opened the bedroom door a crack. The landing was very smoky, acidic fumes took his breath away, burning his throat and stinging his eyes. He turned his head back towards his room and took a deep breath. He shut his eyes tight and then dived onto the landing, crawling to the opposite door.

His head pulsed with the drum of fear. This was not a dream, not a game. The fire was real, his life threatened. Not just his life, but those of his mother and father, his brother and sister, and the beautiful old farmhouse in which they lived - all depended on what he did now. The terror of his dream resurfaced but so did his resolve. He pushed open the door to his parents' bedroom, squeezed through the gap and then shut it tight behind him.

The room was bathed in moonlight; his mother, Kathryn was alone in the bed, still sleeping. She stirred, her long dark hair cascading over the pillow. He wanted to wake her gently, but his light touch involuntarily gripped her,

transmitting his fear like an electric shock. She sat up, wide awake. He could see his own frightened face in the moonlight, reflected in the dressing table mirror. He pulled at his mother's hand and she reached out to take him in her arms as she always did when the bad dreams came.

"No!" he protested. Tears streamed down his face. "It's come, the fire's come!"

But she had smelt the fumes and was already moving. As the doe scents the lioness, protecting her young and flight became one simultaneous action. She crouched down, pulling him to the floor. He was shaking uncontrollably, his eyes full of fear.

She gripped his shoulders firmly. "Where's the fire, Jonno? Is it in your room?"

"No, Mummy," he croaked, "down the stairs!" His voice wailed with rising terror. "Where's Daddy?" He felt his mother stiffen as she held him close.

"He's not home yet, he's not!" she whispered, her face pressed to his, wet with tears.

Now the fumes were coming round the door, making them cough and fight for breath. They moved to the window, breathing the clear night air. But Jonno knew they would not escape that way, leaving the other children behind. His mother's eyes were wide and staring as she struggled to speak.

"We must stay together. Are you ready?" He nodded, grasping her hand.

They kept close to the floor and opened the door. Thick black smoke billowed into the room, initially knocking them back. They had to reach the other children's bedrooms at the opposite end of the landing, away from the stairwell. She gripped his hand tightly as they crawled along blindly to his sister's door. The smoke thinned, its path diverted into the two, now empty, bedrooms. As Kathryn pushed the door open, Jonno broke from her grasp and ran to the bed.

He pulled back the covers shouting, "Wake up, Sarah!"

His mother did not wait for Sarah to wake, lifting her ten year old daughter bodily from the bed. She was no lightweight, but Jonno saw his mother empowered with a strength he did not know she possessed.

"Hold on to me, Jonno," she commanded. "Keep moving!"

It was impossible to crawl now and they staggered into the passage. The smoke billowed thick again. Sarah awoke and they all began to choke and cough,

their eyes streaming. Jonno took the lead, pulling his mother by her nightgown. He tried to breath but there was no air, only foul, putrid smoke which hurt his chest and stung his eyes. He fumbled for the door handle and pummelled with his little fists. The door burst open and they fell inside. He kicked it shut with his foot. They lay on the floor coughing and wheezing, but there was no time to rest. Paul stared at them in a daze. He was big for a twelve year old, already a half grown man.

"Open the window!" gasped Kathryn. They were overcome from breathing the smoke and fumes but as Paul lifted the big sash window, Jonno knew what they must do next. His constant dreams of fire had prompted their father, David, to drill the children thoroughly in fire safety and evacuation from the house.

It was well after midnight when, driven by fear, one by one they dropped from the upper window. The heat was intense, scorching bare feet as they ran across the kitchen roof and jumped to safety. They had followed David's instructions exactly; his foresight had saved their lives.

As they breathed fresh air at last, the initial relief was immediately overshadowed by an even greater terror. David's car, used every night as a minicab to earn extra money, was parked inside the gate. He had returned home before the fire started.

Jonno was first to react and ran to the nearest window. "Daddy, where's my Daddy!" he screamed in blind panic. Sarah took up his cry. The window was blackened, illuminated by a faint orange glow deep inside the house. They ran from window to window, door to door, their screams and cries for their father were pitiful, but unheeded.

Kathryn ran after them like a mother bird, flailing her arms, vainly attempting to catch and comfort her offspring. Then she watched in horror as Paul emerged from the shed, wielding his father's wood-axe.

"Stop, Paul! No!" she screamed as he stumbled towards the house. She pursued him and grabbed his shoulder, spinning him round as he began to swing the axe towards a window. "No!" she yelled, "you would die in there!" Kathryn threw her full weight against him to counter the momentum of his swing. They fell to the ground in a heap of arms and legs, the axe narrowly missing Kathryn's

head. Paul struggled to his feet, standing over her, the axe still in his hands.

She shouted again, her voice rasping harshly, "Get your bike! Go to Mac's garage!" She was gulping for breath, her voice a strangled croak. "Raise the alarm... get the fire brigade!"

He stared at her, seething with anger, seemingly blinded by the need to follow his own course of action.

"Go!" she screamed as she scrambled to her feet.

Paul's eyes burned with deep resentment. Then he threw down the axe and ran back to the shed to obey his mother's orders.

Jonno and Sarah had clung together, witnessing this frightening scene. Jonno had only ever known love. The fire had turned the people he loved into monsters and he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. This was his fire, the fire from his dream; it was all his fault. Paul was gone a long time and when at last the fire engines were heard approaching from the road, it was already too late.

Kathryn and the two younger children had watched, helpless and in fascinated horror, as the fire had taken hold of the old farmhouse. Brilliant orange and yellow flames had flickered at the windows; a leaping, writhing, flamenco dance; a crescendo of fury culminating in the sound of bursting glass like the cracking of a thousand castanets.

As each window in turn had given way to the heat, the fire within had become the furnace without. The flames had leapt up to the eaves like a pack of hungry wolves, consuming walls, roof, and everything they owned and loved to total destruction.

Their faces had burned from the intense heat, though they shivered in their night clothes. Clouds of hot ash had scorched their hair and skin and the dreadful smell of burning had flared in their nostrils, searing eyes and throats, but still they had not turned away. On his return, Paul had stayed with the firemen, trying to help put out the flames, but there was nothing left to save.

When at last the dawn leaked across the sky, like spilt water diluting the darkness and washing away the stars, the harsh cold daylight revealed the blackened charred remains of their home. Then came the dreadful confirmation from the fire officer. David had been inside the house and had perished in the fire.

CHAPTER ONE
THE HOMECOMING

Marham, Norfolk. June 1999

It was more by a quirk of fate than from any preordained plan that this particular homecoming took place at RAF Marham in Norfolk.

Groups of expectant families watched the Tri-Star touch down on the runway and taxi to a halt at the start of a beautiful English summer's day. The returning RAF personnel looked tired but cheerful as they filed from the aircraft in their combat fatigues.

Tornado Navigator, Johnathon Amis, paid scant attention to the Station Commander's words of welcome. At six foot two, he had an advantage and, blinking against the morning sun, his dark eyes scanned the crowd for familiar faces as he descended from the aircraft. After ten weeks on operational duties in the Balkans' war zone he felt drained but elated. The words of his commanding officer, back in Corsica, were still fresh in his mind. 'You are to be included in the operational honours list to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross.' Emerging as he was from a very bloody war, he felt able to hold his head high and rejoin the human race for the next two weeks at least.

As he stepped onto the tarmac, the two groups converged. It was then he caught sight of his sister as she waved to him from within the throng of people. She stood out from the crowd, wearing a bright red polka-dot dress, her long blonde hair flying with the breeze.

"Jonno!" she called. "Over here, Jonno!" He waved back, making his way towards her and his mother, Kathryn.

Sarah hugged him. "It's so good to see you!" she said. "Did you come under attack? Was it bad?" Her rapid-fire questions continued. "Did you see the refugees? It's been all over the news for weeks. We were so worried!"

"Hey, slow down, drama queen." He laughed at her exuberance, returning the hug, "You don't change, do you? Look, I'm all in one piece."

Kathryn stepped forward to prise him from his sister's embrace. "How about a kiss for your Mum?" she said, locking him in her own arms. During all his seven years in the RAF, Kathryn and Sarah had never missed a homecoming.

The whirl and click of the motor drive on a photographer's camera alerted him to the presence of the media. A male photographer, accompanied by a female reporter, approached them. Their security badges announced they were from RAF News.

“One for the paper, sir?” the photographer asked.

“Why not?” Jonno replied, putting his arms round Kathryn and Sarah. The newsman's camera caught the image reflecting another safe arrival home.

“Can I take your names for the caption?” asked the girl.

Jonno had become aware of her as the cameraman approached them. He looked, and then looked again. There was something quite arresting about her. She was startlingly attractive, yet in an unassuming way. In height, she was around five-foot-six, but with an elegant poise. Definitely worth that second look. Her formal black dress was short and sleeveless, in striking contrast to the soft creamy skin tones of her perfectly proportioned limbs. Dark glasses obscured her eyes, making her seem mysterious.

“Your names?” she repeated.

He was embarrassed to realise he had been staring at her. “Oh, yes, sorry,” he stammered, losing his natural calm. “Er ...Flight Lieutenant Johnathon Amis ... and this is my mother, Kathryn, and sister, Sarah.” He watched as she scribbled symbols on her pad, dumbly fascinated by her long fingers. His eyes were drawn to her graceful neck, high cheek bones and deep auburn hair, swept up in a pleat.

“That's Johnathon, with an 'o',” said Sarah. “He's Jonno to us.” Sarah's intervention caused him to recover his power of speech.

“She's been saying that all my life,” he said trying to hide his embarrassment. “My sister is my spokesperson.”

“Lucky you,” the girl quipped back, and they all laughed.

Anxious as he was to leave the base, he suddenly felt he couldn't just walk away and needed to know more about her.

“What's your name?” he asked, trying to keep his thoughts in order.

She seemed to hesitate, but then she lifted her hand up to her face, removed the dark glasses and said, “Lisa, Lisa Hartnell.”

He found himself looking into eyes so unusual they took his breath away. Deep pools of almost emerald green, flecked with gold. Beautiful eyes that sparkled in

the morning sunlight, and yet they seemed strangely familiar. He began to trawl through his memory. There had been a lot of girls, but who did he know with eyes like hers? Someone from his past reminded him of this lovely girl.

Her photographer colleague had moved on, busy capturing other family groups on film. “Come on, Lisa,” he shouted. “More names over here!”

“Right there, Martin!” she called out. Then she turned back to Jonno. “Can I ask you something, Flight Lieutenant?” Her eyes looked straight into his.

“You want my autograph?” he joked. Their mutual gaze seemed locked on an invisible thread.

“Maybe.” She laughed nervously and looked away. “Martin and I are conducting in-depth interviews for stories on the Balkan crisis. Would you like to take part?”

“Which part can I take?” he joked again, striving to remain calm.

She smiled, calmly ignoring the playful overtones in his comment. “Can you come back to the base tomorrow, around eleven?”

Now that his leave had officially started, returning to the base could not have been further from his mind, but he already knew he would, just to see her again.

“I should be delighted,” he said. “I’ll have to clear it with my CO first, but thank you for asking me.”

She extended her hand and he shook it. “No, thank you,”

Her hand was soft and warm to his touch.

“I’ll look forward to it,” was all he could think to say. Their eyes met once more. The photographer was calling for her again. Jonno watched the colour in her cheeks rise to a soft pink blush.

Her voice came to him in a whisper. “Can I have my hand back, please?”

He jumped. “I’m sorry,” he said, releasing his hold. “Goodbye, Lisa.” He had not intended to be forward or to embarrass her and she hurried away to join her colleague, not looking back.

He watched her disappear into the crowd and hoped he had not offended her. Then Sarah and Kathryn locked arms with him, steering him away. His sister was chattering on about their plans for his leave, but he wasn’t really listening. He was still thinking about Lisa. In those few moments he had been captivated by her. But he had also experienced a curious sense of déjà vu.

At last the family left the base, piling into Kathryn's old Volvo estate amid her shopping and Jonno's kitbags. The drive home was a short one. Greengate Lodge was only three miles away on the other side of Marham village. It had been Jonno's home since he was eight years old, but it would always be Granddad Max's house.

As they drove through the familiar country lanes, he thought about that first arrival. Their grandparents had opened not only their home but their hearts, helping the shattered little family rebuild their lives. They had stayed and he smiled to himself, remembering how his grandfather had taught him to laugh again and keep a sense of humour. Granddad's TLC had worked on him and Sarah. Paul was also close to his grandfather, but over the years he had distanced himself from the rest of the family.

As his mother drove through the village, Jonno shook off thoughts of the past. "I have something special to tell you," he said. Then he paused, suddenly embarrassed by what he was about to say. "They're going to give me an award."

"You're joking!" exclaimed Sarah, "a real award! Which one? What for?"

"Oh, it's nothing much, only a DFC." His face burst into a wide grin as his sister predictably squealed again with excitement. She almost leapt over from the back seat towards him with a kiss and a hug.

"Oh, how wonderful!" said Kathryn, trying to keep her eyes on the road. "Tell us what happened." She was brimming over with pride.

"Yes, what did you do?" asked Sarah.

His mind slid back to the horrors of that day. No, he couldn't talk about it now, not in detail. "I'll tell you all about it later," he said. "It's still a bit hush hush." He shrugged it off. It could wait until the official announcement and report.

His mother turned the car into the driveway of Greengate Lodge. They entered the open double gates and the Volvo crunched onto the gravel driveway. She parked in front of the house and as they unloaded the car, Jonno looked for the familiar figure of his grandfather. He was normally always at the door to welcome him.

"Where's Max?" he asked. The 'granddad' had been dropped many years ago.

"Probably asleep," said Kathryn. "He's not been too well recently." He

frowned. "Only his blood pressure and a cold," she added, "nothing to worry about."

Max had always been so active and alert, they had never thought of him as old, but since Grandma Sadie had passed away two years ago their grandfather had seemed to age quickly. Jonno was impatient as Sarah unlocked the front door.

"He will be eighty-five next week. He is beginning to slow down," she said, but Jonno had already entered the house ahead of her, anxious to find his grandfather. Max had enjoyed a long career in the RAF until his retirement at Marham. He had influenced both Jonno and Paul to aim for flying careers.

Jonno found him dozing on the bench in the rear garden. The air was heavy with the scent of summer roses, planted by Sadie in this corner. It was Max's favourite spot. In spite of the warm day, he wore his tweed sports jacket and a straw panama hat. His eyes were closed, but as Jonno approached he opened them and a broad smile filled his wrinkled face.

"Off to the cricket are we, Max?" Jonno clasped the old man's hands. They felt very cold.

"Chance would be a fine thing, lad. I could still knock 'em for six." His voice was thin, like a tuneless reed pipe.

Jonno sat down next to him. "Mum says you've not been too well. Have you got a cold?"

"Cold be damned," he replied, a little more strongly. "Bloody doctor's tablets make me feel like a corpse!"

Sarah had joined them in the garden. "They're to keep your blood pressure down," she said, kneeling on the grass beside them.

Max winked at Sarah. "Down, but not out, eh sweetie?" He turned to his grandson. "Anyway, young Jonno, how are you? Still showing those Yanks how it's done?"

Jonno smiled wryly. "Something like that, Max. It's a pretty nasty situation out there and we've made a bit of a mess of Belgrade."

"That's war, son, same as in my time." Max warmed to the subject. "We've been following it all on the telly. It's amazing! The photography and how much detail they show. I take my hat off to you young chaps. Your machines are a hundred times faster than our old kites."

Jonno nodded, acknowledging the old man's enduring enthusiasm for combat flight. "I have something good to tell you, Max. I hope you will be pleased."

His grandfather looked up at him.

"They're going to give me a DFC in the honours for Operation Allied Force."

The old man gasped with obvious delight and shook his grandson's hand warmly. "Congratulations, son, I'm so glad I've lived to see the day." His head nodded approvingly. "You must tell me all about it later. You know I'm very proud of you, you and your brother."

Jonno was swiftly reminded that he wasn't the only family member involved in the current Kosovo crisis. "Have you heard from Paul?" he asked, knowing that Max was the one person his brother would contact.

"Ask your sister, we haven't heard for weeks." Max's speech had slowed down. He suddenly seemed exhausted and Jonno was not sure if this was natural tiredness or sadness over Paul's lack of contact. He looked to Sarah for confirmation; she shook her head. Jonno was not surprised. Sometimes he wondered if his brother cared at all about the family.

"I'm sure we'll hear something soon," he said, patting Max on the knee. "I'm home for two weeks; perhaps we can have a day out together. We can go to the cricket if you like."

"That would be grand, son." Max's voice dropped back to a whisper, his eyes closed once more.

"I'll leave you to enjoy the sunshine," he said, standing up. He walked away, acutely aware of how frail Max had become. A little stab of fear reminded him that peace, as well as war, could rob him of loved ones.

He paused on re-entering the large kitchen which had always been the hub of family life at Greengate, and allowed the scene to wash over him, enveloping him with its familiar sense of security. His mother was there, preparing a salad for lunch. He went over to her. Silver streaks showed through her dark curls and he was suddenly aware how careworn she looked.

"It's great to be home, Mum," he said. "You look tired. What's worrying you?"

She continued with her chopping. "I worry about all of you. That's what mothers do." She turned to face him. "Especially you."

"Why me especially?" He was surprised. "You know I have a charmed life."

Kathryn dropped her gaze and turned back to the kitchen counter. “There's no such thing,” she said. There was a sad finality in her voice. The ghosts of the past were never far away.

Jonno was sorry, although he had intended the words light-heartedly. But it was true that the family had always considered him to be psychic. The fire nightmares, which had plagued his early years, had later been interpreted as a warning of the house fire which took his father's life. Jonno had been hailed a hero for saving the rest of the family. Sometime during his early teens, the nightmares had ceased and he had forgotten all about them. Although even now, he sometimes experienced a sixth sense, even a prior knowledge of events.

Sarah came in from the garden and went to the fridge. “Cold beer?” she asked him.

“Love one,” he replied, and taking the can from her hand, he moved to the big oak table on the other side of the room. He sat down on the long wicker settle under the window. From there, he could see Max still dozing on the garden bench.

Sarah followed his gaze. “We're so glad you'll be here for Max's birthday,” she said. “You know we've planned a surprise party.”

“Yes, wonderful!” said Jonno. “Who's coming?”

“Most of his pals from the bowls and cricket clubs, and lots of people from the base, and...” Sarah looked out of the window again and lowered her voice. “I've managed to track down three of his old flying buddies through the Veterans' Association. Altogether we'll have about thirty guests and Mum has booked the club lounge at the base.”

“That's fantastic!” Jonno was pleased he would be part of his grandfather's special day. “Have you arranged a fly past?” he asked, baiting her along.

“I thought *you* would have arranged that for us - Flight Lieutenant,” she said with mock indignation poking him in the ribs. They started to wrestle, laughing and scrapping, just as they always had.

Kathryn called out to them. “If you two don't pack it in there'll be no lunch!” She was laughing too, her pensive mood lifted.

It was a family joke and a constant source of amazement to friends that Kathryn's three children were all so different. Paul was a redhead with dark freckles and the image of his father, David. But unlike his father, Paul was a

loner. Two years younger, Sarah was blonde like her grandfather had been in his youth. Not only did she have his good looks but also his sense of humour.

Jonno also had his grandfather's sunny disposition but in looks, he was dark, like Kathryn. Deep olive skin and jet black hair was their genetic inheritance from Kathryn's mother. Sadie had met Max when he was stationed near Woomera, in the Australian outback in the fifties. She had been quarter Aboriginal and was only seventeen when they fell in love. Max had eventually brought her back to England as his wife.

Kathryn raised her voice. "Sarah, you haven't told Jonno your own news."

"What news?" His curiosity was aroused.

"I'm starting a new job in London, beginning of August." She was out of breath from their tussle.

"London!" He was surprised and released his arm-lock on her.

"Yes," she said, smoothing back her dishevelled hair. "It means I'll have to find somewhere to live within commuting distance, that's the only snag."

"Nonsense!" said Kathryn, bringing the finished salad bowl over to the table. "You can't stay buried in Marham all your life. It's far too good an opportunity."

"What's the job? Loo polisher at Buck House?" he teased.

Sarah lunged at him, feigning an ear cuff. She picked up an envelope from the dresser, took out the contents and began reading importantly. "Position of Legal Secretary to our United Kingdom sector in the City of London - Reporting directly to the senior partners - Responsible for translation of Contracts and other documents, from French and German to English and vice versa - Bla-de-bla, ..." She gabbled on breathlessly. "Here's the punch line brother, the starting salary is twenty-six thousand pounds a year!"

"Wow!" said Jonno. "How good is that?"

Sarah laughed at him. "For a mere legal secretary-bird, yes, it's very good."

"So all those years of swotting and exams finally paid off," he said, patting her on the back. He was thrilled for her. "How do you feel about moving away?" He was very aware that Sarah had always been happy to live at home.

"I'll have to find a bed sit somewhere, I suppose." She went over to Kathryn. Her enthusiasm seemed to wane. "I'll come home for weekends. They say London dies at the weekend." He sensed this statement seemed to satisfy mother

and daughter.

He left them together and went out into the garden. It was a rare, premonitory moment. Sarah's new life would be good for her and in time she would be happy, of this he felt quite sure.

He also felt very sure and confident of his own future. Combat conditions had brought out the best in him. He was deeply affected by the atrocities he had witnessed, but his award was a great honour, and he hoped it would lead to promotion within the Service he loved. At this moment he thought, his life couldn't get much better. Then Lisa came back into his mind. The memory of her perfume, mingled with the scent of roses, prompting second thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

LISA

“What is it like? When you actually come under anti-aircraft fire, what are your thoughts and feelings?”

Lisa’s voice was vibrant, and as Jonno sat facing her over a small table in the Officers’ Mess, she was even more stunning than he’d remembered from the previous day. He closed his eyes to block out her image and recall the sorties in the Balkans.

“It’s mesmerizing. The light and colour is fantastic, like a huge firework display coming up from the ground and bursting all around.” It was still so vivid in his mind’s eye. “You have to keep reminding yourself that you’re actually under fire from hostiles.”

She looked up from her notebook. “My sources tell me congratulations are in order for you, Flight Lieutenant. DFC?” Her head was slightly inclined, eyebrows raised quizzically.

Jonno’s face registered his surprise. He had arrived at the station early and waited patiently while she interviewed other crew members. Today she wore a cream dress. It was fitted and low cut, accentuating her figure. Her auburn hair fell loose to her shoulders, like a curtain of burnished gold. He had been watching her intently, imprinting every feature, every gesture in his mind, storing the images away to bring out and cherish later.

“You’re quick off the mark,” he said with a nervous smile. “That was still classified until this morning.” Her eyes had an almost transparent clearness; limpid pools. If he slipped he felt he could drown, fathoms deep.

“So are you allowed to tell me about it?” She moved her head to the opposite angle, waiting for an answer.

“After an exclusive, are we?” he bantered, acutely aware of his own nervousness. Her eyes were so captivating, so familiar. He lowered his gaze and immediately found himself admiring the perfect curves of her body as she moved. He forced himself to look away. He wanted to win her respect and make a good impression, not to embarrass her.

“I have clearance to talk about what happened that day, but you’ll have to wait for the official announcement on the award,” he cautioned. “There are others and we mustn’t upstage them.”

She gave a little laugh, illuminating her face. “That’s okay,” she said. She looked straight into his eyes, her pen poised over the notebook, waiting.

He was finding it difficult to concentrate and he wanted to make a joke to break the tension. What he was about to say however, was no joking matter. He took a deep breath and began with the events which had led to him, and his pilot officer, to each be recommended for the DFC.

“My pilot, Squadron Leader Pete Meredith and I, were leading a four-ship formation in the first of a wave of attacks against pre-identified targets.” She began writing in her notebook, using the shorthand symbols he had noticed the previous day.

Her questions continued. “How long did the missions last?”

Listening to her voice his pulse quickened. He felt his hands tremble and he rested his elbows on the table, his fingers pressed together in front of his mouth, as though he were praying.

“From RAF Bruggen in West Germany, each one took around seven hours. We were striking at military installations and infrastructure targets, all under cover of darkness. We also had to refuel in midair from the VC10 tankers three times during every mission.”

“So what happened on this particular mission?” she asked.

Jonno closed his eyes and remembered. Telling Lisa what happened was almost as nerve-racking as the actual events.

“We had successfully completed our attack on an ammo dump and I was trying to locate a tanker to refuel and turn for home. We were flying near the Albanian border. The dawn was breaking when we saw a group of refugees moving along the road, fleeing from Kosovo. There were about thirty of them, mainly women children and old people.

“We saw three aircraft on our radar, moving towards the group and identified them as Serb fighters, MIGS in tight formation about five miles off. The column of refugees was an easy target for the Russian built fighter planes to attack with cluster bombs or even with machine guns.”

“And how did you respond to that situation?” Lisa’s face was alive with interest.

“Pete and I made a crew decision to break from our flight plan and give chase. I also guided two Puma helicopters to the area to stand by for casualties while we gave cover.” He recalled their split-second decisions on that day. “The lead MIG was coming in low over the road. We fired off our air-to-air missile and dispatched him only half a mile from the civilians. The other two MIGS broke away and disappeared, but we continued our patrol until the ‘copters escorted the group safely over the border.” He recalled the elation he had felt at having saved so many civilians from certain death. He had seen the evidence of other groups which had not been so lucky.

“What about your fuel?” she asked. This question reminded him of the final hurdle crossed that day.

“By then we were critically short,” he said. “After a few hairy minutes, I located a VC10 tanker on the other side of the border. We were at last able to refuel to make the return journey to Bruggen, but it was a close call”

All this time Lisa had continued writing in her notebook. “Two more heroes make the long journey home.” She smiled up at him. “That will be my header for the feature.”

He laughed. “Sounds a bit pretentious; we were only doing our job.”

“And a fantastic job too,” she replied, still writing in her notebook.

Now she had her story he sensed the interview might be coming to an end. She had hardly left his thoughts since yesterday. If she were to hurry away he feared he might never see her again. He wanted to know everything about her.

“Do you live locally, Lisa?” he asked.

She seemed surprised by his question and stopped writing to answer him. “Oh no, I come from Stratford-on-Avon.”

“Ah, the Bard’s country,” he said, hoping to show he had some literary awareness.

“Yes, but I’m staying locally with Martin.”

Jonno tensed and looked away; he should have guessed she wouldn’t be alone. He rubbed his fingertips together, visibly displaying his unease.

The corners of her mouth rose in a smile like a crescent moon as she continued speaking. “Martin - and Julie, his wife, but it’s only temporary.”

Jonno sighed, hoping his relief was not too apparent. He wanted to ask her so many things, but she cut him short.

“I only have a couple more questions, Flight Lieutenant. Can I finish the interview?”

“I’m sorry, Lisa, please continue.” He was acutely aware his time was running out.

“Tell me about the Squadron’s move from Bruggen?”

“The move to Solenzara, the French base in Corsica, was to cut flying times in half. We were ready to start operations from there by first of June, but within a week the bombing campaign was halted. You know the rest.”

“Yes,” she said. “Peace keeping troops are in and the bombers are out.”

“Down, but not out,” he corrected. “We’ll remain on standby for the present.”

“But they let you have home leave?”

“Bruggen is my Squadron’s home base,” he said. “But a lot of us don’t have family out there. My UK leave was cancelled back in February, along with the rest of the crews who flew in yesterday. Including time in the Gulf before Kosovo, I haven’t been home for nine months.”

“Do you miss home and your family?”

“Always, very much,” said Jonno.

She looked straight at him. “Is there anyone special you miss?”

He held his gaze to hers, and thought how much he would like her to be that special person. His hands clasped together tightly on the table, the knuckles white with tension. “Is this part of the interview, Miss Hartnell?” His formality belied the very personal tone their conversation had taken.

“Answer the question, please,” she said very quietly. Her professional manner continued but she had stopped scribbling in her notebook.

“If you mean, do I have a romantic association with anyone, well, that depends.” He tried to appear detached but she was still looking at him. He babbled on, “I’ve met someone recently. I’d very much like to ask them out.”

“Why don’t you?” she asked. Then she looked away. “She can only say, ‘No’”.

“I’m hoping she’ll say, ‘Yes’. What do you think I should do?”

“Just ask her,” she said. He sensed a slight impatience in her voice, or was it disappointment? She stood up, closing her notebook. “Thank you for your time, Flight Lieutenant.” The formality continued, “you’ve been very forthcoming, and of course the article will not mention any names.” She started to turn away and he knew it was now or never.

“Lisa?” his voice had an urgent tone. She turned back to face him, “Lisa, would you have dinner with me tonight?”

For a moment she looked taken aback, and he thought she would refuse. Then a shy smile spread across her face and her eyes seemed to brim over with merriment. The sense of panic he had felt rising within him ebbed away.

“I would love to,” she said at last. “Besides, you must have known, she couldn’t say no, could she?”

Jonno borrowed the Volvo and collected Lisa from Martin’s home in nearby Kings Lynn. She looked fabulous, in a long silk dress of mint green which clung to her figure. Her shining auburn hair fell around her slender shoulders. When she walked, it looked as if she was floating; like a Greek goddess, ageless, timeless. That thought opened the conversation.

“I hope you like Greek cuisine,” he said as they drove out of town.

“I think so,” she replied, “I like mousaka, so I guess I do. Where are we going?”

“Have you heard of the Constantia Cottage restaurant?”

“Oh, yes I have, but I’ve never been there. Fabulous Greek food and live Greek music, by all accounts,” she seemed happy with his choice. “But it’s near Cromer on the coast isn’t it?”

“Our booking’s not until nine o’clock, so I thought we’d do something else first.” He glanced away from the road to gauge her reaction. “Any preferences?”

“It’s such a lovely evening, a walk in the fresh air would be wonderful,” she suggested. “I’ve been stuck in the office all day.”

“Excellent,” he said, “I know the very place and it’s sort of on the way, if you don’t mind going the long way round to Cromer.” She laughed again and he realised Lisa was as nervous as he.

He drove on to Norwich and parked the car near the old Cathedral. The pavement bars had opened their doors and set their tables and chairs outside. Music and the bubbling sound of conversation and laughter rose and fell as they walked towards Bishops Bridge.

The pathway led down beside the river. Oak, birch and ash trees towered overhead, and banks of green willow stretched their fronds into the flowing water, transforming the view into a perfect rural landscape, far removed from the nearby old town setting.

They stopped, absorbing the serenity of the scene. Damsel flies in their patriotic reds and blues danced their mating ritual, conjoined in pairs, kissing the white flowering watercress which grew in abundance at the margins of the river. Ducks quacked and dabbled and moorhens darted in and out of the reed beds. He watched Lisa's expressive face as she took delight in their surroundings.

"It's beautiful here," she said. "So peaceful, don't you think?"

As the evening sun caught the golden lights in her hair and the soft green of her dress rippled in the breeze, she seemed to blend into nature's colour scheme; fragile and transient as if she wasn't really there. He caught his breath and his emotions stirred with an odd mix of fear and joy.

He looked back at the river. "Yes, it's great to be home and it's great to be here." He wanted to add, 'with you', but he didn't want to reveal his growing feelings for her. They were too new and precious to risk. As they walked on again she linked her arm through his and he took her hand.

"So what do you do when you're not flying, Johnathon?"

"Jonno," he corrected, "please call me Jonno."

Her face lit up. "I thought that was your family name," she said. "For nearest and dearest only."

"It is," he said amused. "So, what would you like to call me?"

"Jonno," she said, with a coy smile. "Yes, that's fine by me."

He caught her gaze and felt the delicious sense of raised emotion that comes with new love.

Reluctant as he was to mar the moment, he was desperate for an answer to the question uppermost in his mind. "Lisa, please don't take this the wrong way, but I keep thinking we must have met before?"

She stopped walking, surprised and apparently perplexed by his question.
“Oh no, I don’t think so. Why do you ask?”

“I know it sounds really crass and I can’t fix a time or a place.” He sighed, trying to make his meaning clear. “It’s more a feeling that I know you. I sensed it the moment we met.”

“But that was only yesterday.” She did not seem to share his intuition.

“I think it was before that.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “A long time ago.”

“No, I’m sure you are mistaken.” Her smile was replaced by a puzzled expression. “I think I would have remembered if we’d met before. Perhaps I remind you of someone else?” Her eyes were wide open. The deep green pupils dilated in the soft evening light, making them appear sad. “Another girl, perhaps?”

“Oh no!” He answered quickly, anxious to dispel the sombre mood he had created. “It wasn’t anyone else, definitely not.” There had been other girlfriends but no one remotely like Lisa.

He began to feel he had blundered, so he steered the conversation round. “Perhaps it’s just that I feel at ease with you, as if I’d known you for a long time.” They continued to walk arm-in-arm, hand-in-hand. To his relief her smile returned, lighting up her exquisite features.

“So now, tell me what else you like to do?” she asked as they walked on again.

“Oh, cricket, rugby, all sports. Almost obligatory in Service life and of course, it keeps the fitness up to scratch. What about you?”

“I like horse riding. It’s been my passion since I was twelve years old.”

“My sister Sarah rides,” he said. “Mum owns a cottage up the coast. When we were kids, they used to ride along the beach and bring the ponies right up to the kitchen window.”

“How lovely! And did you ride with them?”

“No. Paul and I used to go fishing with Max.”

“Paul?”

“Paul is my elder brother. He’s a pilot now, flying Harrier jets. His squadron’s in Kosovo, but he doesn’t keep in touch with the family much.”

“And who’s Max?”

“Max is our grandfather. We came to live with Max and Grandma Sadie when I was eight.” They had reached an old wooden bench and sat down facing the river, so close their bodies touched.

She didn’t ask anything, but when he looked into her eyes the questions were there. Before he realised, he was telling Lisa all the family history. Even the painful parts he never normally spoke about. He wasn’t seeking sympathy; he never did that with girls. It was a strange feeling, that he wanted Lisa to understand him, to know him as a person. As the details emerged she seemed to draw closer and her hand gripped his a little tighter.

“It must have been very difficult for all of you,” she said, thoughtfully.

He nodded in reply and they turned towards each other. He caught the scent of her perfume once more and the desire to kiss her was overwhelming. He lifted his hand to her face and smoothed back a stray strand of hair from her cheek.

“There,” he said, “that’s twice I’ve made you look sad.”

The corners of her mouth rose again and her eyes brightened.

“That’s enough about me,” he said. “Tell me about you and your family.” Jonno was perplexed to see the sad expression return.

“My childhood was rather lonely. I am an only child and my parents are rather aloof. I used to think I must have been adopted, but I wasn’t.” She smiled at him again. “Probably why I like horses; they’re big, wild and aggressive and their love is enduring.”

“Did you have your own horse?”

She shrugged with a dismissive humph. “Not allowed. When I had to be at home I lost myself in music. I used to play the piano.”

He sensed Lisa also wanted him to understand her background. Losing one parent was terrible but not being really loved or understood by two parents was probably worse.

“Do you still see them?” he asked gently.

“Not more than I have to. But I love being a journalist and it takes me all over the country, so life’s okay.” Her mouth formed a smile, but her eyes remained sad.

“Do you ever go abroad for RAF News?” He wanted to steer away from emotionally crippling topics.

“I get to cover stations and events in the UK. I probably would go abroad if I stayed with them, but I’m moving on soon.”

Jonno felt his hand grip her shoulder more firmly. “Moving where?” he asked. Even though he would be returning to Germany at the end of his leave, he must not lose contact with Lisa now.

She placed her hand over his in a reassuring gesture. “I’m ninety-nine percent certain of a job with the ‘Sunday Voice’,” she answered. “It’s a golden opportunity and I’m hoping to work on features. The paper has moved from Fleet Street to brand new premises in the Docklands. Everything is ‘state of the art’, but I’d have to live in the City.”

“Well, that’s very strange,” he said.

“Why? What is?” she asked.

“Sarah is also moving to London to start a new job.”

“Oh, that’s good,” she said. “Maybe we have the same birth sign. When’s her birthday?”

“Sarah’s birthday?” he hesitated. “...May twenty-seventh.”

“She’s Gemini, so it’s not that.” She seemed disappointed.

“When’s yours?” he asked.

“I’m Virgo, September twentieth.”

Jonno shook his head, almost disbelieving.

She squeezed his hand. “Tell me?” She was laughing at his puzzled expression.

He could no longer suppress his feelings and cupping her lovely face in his hands, he kissed her gently on the lips. “That’s my birthday too,” he whispered, and he took her in his arms. This time she kissed him back, gently at first, and then with a passion which matched his own. He felt a deep longing within him at last being fulfilled.

At that precise moment in the warmth of their embrace, with the evening sun casting a glow across the water its rays touching their skin, he felt a cold chill run right through him. As if a dark shadow had crossed the sun.