

D b cle,

a novel by Paul Henke

CHAPTER 1 PM 1 April 1997 - All Fools' Day.

His bleeper went and he rolled over in his sleep with a low groan. By the time the third bleep had sounded, he was wide awake and reaching out to stop the noise. The body lying alongside him sighed softly and, with a distinct American accent, said 'Jeez, it's not time to get up already, is it?'

Hunter smiled and leaned over her. 'No, you can go back to sleep. Unfortunately, I have to go. Duty calls.'

Knowing what he did for a living his companion jerked wide awake. 'What's the problem?'

'No idea. Usually nothing. Just some local plod panicking over something washed up on a beach which he doesn't immediately recognise. It almost never amounts to anything,' he said, reaching for his socks. Remembering where he was and with whom, he dropped the socks and picked up his shirt. He quickly put it on and continued dressing.

'What's a plod?' his companion asked, wide awake, and looking at him with interest.

'A policeman. The local fuzz are told there's an unidentified object on the beach and instead of looking for themselves, they call us straight away. So I'm bleeped because I have the duty. Sod it,' he added under his breath.

'You will be careful, won't you?' she said, worriedly.

'Fear not,' Hunter did his best to sound joyful. 'It's all in a day's work.' He mentally cringed at the banality of his words but could find nothing else to say. He knew, like everyone else operating in the world of bomb disposal, that the most

innocuous of calls could easily result in a death - in this case, his. 'Look, if I'm not back by the time you have to leave for your plane,' he leaned over her, looked into her eyes and smiled, 'let yourself out and don't lock the doors.'

'I will,' she breathed, softly, kissing him, 'and thanks.'

He gave his lop-sided grin and said, 'Don't thank me. I enjoyed it too.'

'If you're ever in the States.....'

'I'll look you up. Sorry,' he pushed himself up off the bed, 'I've got to go.'

With a wave of his hand he left the room and went downstairs to the telephone to ring the duty number.

'Hunter,' was all he said.

'Boss. Sorry boss, to disturb you, like,' said a voice he recognised, the Welsh accent of Leading Seaman Lewis. Although Hunter was a Senior Lieutenant, about to be promoted to Lieutenant Commander in the close and dangerous world of mine warfare and bomb disposal, his team called him "boss" in private and "sir" only when the occasion demanded.

'Okay, Taff,' said Hunter, 'but I'm warning you, this had better be good.'

Knowing the score, and that the "Old Man" was on a heavy date that weekend, Taff Lewis was very, very sure of his facts and the reason for the call to his boss.

'Boss, I've doubled checked, and it looks like the real thing washed up on the shore at Poole.'

'Poole, in Dorset?' Hunter said, incredulous.

'Em, yes, boss,' said Lewis, nervously.

'Then why can't the Booties deal with it?' Hunter asked, referring to the Royal Marines based at Hamworthy, near Poole.

'I don't know,' came the truthful reply. 'Except that I've been told that they'd had a call out and nobody was available.'

'Okay, I'll look into it later. What you're telling me is that we're needed and there's no way out.'

'Yes, boss. I guess I am,' replied Lewis.

Hunter thought for a moment or two before he said, ‘I’ll need either the Chief or Samson and one of the others.’

‘The Chief hasn’t responded, but Leading Seaman Samson has. I’ve also managed to get hold of Wilson.’

‘Okay, that’ll do. I’ll meet them in half an hour. I take it that whatever it is, is safely ashore?’

‘Yes, boss. Em,’ Leading Seaman Lewis hesitated, before he said, ‘at least, I think so. You know what it’s like with the local police. I think....em, its Second World War and German.’

‘A mine?’

‘Yes, boss. From the description by the police.’

‘Taff, if it’s a Second World War mine,’ said Hunter, with some asperity, ‘it’s bloody obvious. It’s a sodding big, round, black thing with horns.’ He didn’t add, unless it’s an aerial mine set off acoustically.

‘Yes, sir, that’s exactly what it is,’ said Leading Seaman Lewis, with some relief.

‘Good, then we know what we need. Tell Wilson he isn’t coming but he’s to help get the gear prepped and ready. Let’s get going sooner, rather than later. Do you know what to do?’

‘Yes, boss, no problem,’ replied Lewis and rang off.

Hunter put on his mottled camouflage jacket over his white polo necked sweater, slipped on a pair of black seaman’s boots and let himself out of the cottage. Within moments, he was speeding along the country lanes in his old MGB Roadster. It was a cold, clear night, though the weather forecast promised a fine, warm, spring day. He had not yet turned on the heating in the car as it needed time to warm up, but with his mind racing over the myriad of things he needed to think about, he was oblivious to the cold.

He pulled up at the guardhouse and flashed his identity card. The sentry knew him and his car by sight, so cast only a cursory glance at the piece of plastic held in

Hunter's hand. 'Morning, sir,' said the Petty Officer, 'what brings you in so early?' As he spoke, the Petty Officer saluted and Hunter returned the gesture automatically.

'We've a job on in Poole,' he replied. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. 'Is the galley manned yet?'

'The cook was woken up about half an hour ago, sir, so I expect he's got something on the go.'

'Look, do me a favour will you? Ring him, tell him what's happening and ask him to fix a large flask with coffee...no, better make that tea,' he suddenly remembered how awful Pusser's coffee was, 'and ask him to make bacon sarnies for three.'

'Aye, aye, sir,' replied the sentry, moving from the car to swing open the single pole barrier.

Hunter put the car into gear and moved slowly around the road barriers which prevented a vehicle from ramming straight through the pole. He leant his head out of the window and yelled his thanks to the Petty Officer, before heading for the buildings which housed the tools of his trade.

He parked in the bay marked "Diving Officer" and quickly got out of the car. With the roof up, his six foot two of lank frame did not come out of the small car easily and, as usual whenever he was clambering out, he wondered why he bothered with such a small vehicle. But even as the thought formed, he dismissed it. He knew why. It was his pride and joy and the only thing of any value he owned. Being an officer in the Royal Navy, moving regularly and with tours of duty at sea he had never bought a house. Until recently, he had always billeted in whatever wardroom he was sent to. The cottage he now rented was part of his efforts to create a private life away from the navy.

The double doors of the large, hangar like space were open and he could hear cursing coming from inside. He walked in to find Leading Seaman Samson sucking on a scraped knuckle. The cursing temporarily shut off.

'Is everything ready?' Hunter asked, accepting a cup of tea placed in his hands by Lewis. 'Thanks, Taff.'

‘Yes, boss. I’ve checked the bottle pressures, hooked up the steam machine, and made sure all the pipes are there. I’ve also put the plastic and dets in their stowages. Wilson’s just left. We didn’t need him anymore so I sent him back to his pit and told him to be here at the usual time.’

‘Good. Well done, Taff. Did you remember the shovels?’ There were two ways of dealing with old and unwanted explosives. The easiest and quickest was to blow it up, which was their preferred option. If that was not practical they would need to drill holes in the mine casing and fix the steam machine up to the mine. They would then literally pump steam into the mine which would liquefy the explosive and wash it out. As it solidified again, they would need to use the shovels to bag the explosive to get rid of it, usually by burning it at one of the army demolition ranges. It was a long, laborious process which they could do without.

‘Yes, boss. I put a couple in the back of the Land Rover.’

Hunter nodded, took a sip of his tea and went to look over the gear himself. Fifteen minutes later the three of them were in the Rover and on their way. Hunter drove over to the galley and said to Leading Seaman Samson, ‘Delilah, nip in and see the cook. He should have some sarnies and a flask ready for us.’

Leading Seaman ‘Delilah’ Samson showed gleaming white teeth in his black face and did as he was told.

Once clear of HMS DRYAD and heading for the M27, Samson broke open the pack of bacon sandwiches and handed them round. Hunter was driving, so Lewis took it upon himself to hold Hunter’s sandwich whenever he needed to change gear. Replete, the two leading seamen settled back to try and doze. Hunter concentrated on his driving whilst letting his mind roam to the potential problems ahead.

It took just over an hour to get to Poole where they made straight for the police station. Although there were double yellow lines outside the door, it was barely half past six and since there was very little traffic around, Hunter parked at the front entrance and went in. After introducing himself at the front counter, he was escorted inside to an upstairs office occupied by an overweight, jolly looking sergeant.

‘This is where you’ll find it.’ He pointed at an ordnance survey map of the area. ‘Right there, at the front in Swanage.’

‘Beached?’ asked Hunter, puzzled.

The sergeant chuckled, ‘Bless you, no, sir. It’s still tied to the back of the fancy boat which dragged it in. Caused a right stir, I can tell you.’

‘Say that again. Are you telling me some clown dragged a mine into Swanage?’

‘Aye, and you never seen an area clear so fast. We thought it best not to move it, just in case like. And so we moved the people away from the area and shifted a few more out of the houses which we thought to be too close.’

‘How did it happen? Was it an accident? Did he get caught up in it somehow?’ Knowing mines and small boats, Hunter couldn’t see how in the world it could have happened.

The Sergeant shook his head. ‘The boat owner said he thought it was his duty to take it out of the sea in case a ship or other boat hit it.’

‘Dear God,’ said Hunter despairingly, shaking his head at the stupidity of it. ‘Didn’t he think to stand off, call the coastguard and keep other vessels away? That way, there would have been virtually no danger. Instead of dragging...’ he trailed off, as the Sergeant shrugged expressively at him. The shrug and look said it all from a man who had spent his adult life dealing with the stupidity of the general public.

Hunter nodded his understanding. ‘So where exactly is it now. I mean, is it on a beach, tied to the jetty there, what?’

‘We left it tied to the back of the boat like I said, which is tied to the stone jetty, there.’ He stabbed the map again.

‘Okay, thanks,’ Hunter stood for a few seconds in thought. ‘Get onto the lifeboat at Poole and tell them that, if it’s possible, I’m going to tow the mine back out to sea off St. Alban’s head and blow it up. It will be easier and quicker in the long run. Ask them if they could launch and patrol the area to the east and I’ll cover the west. Also, get on to the coastguard and ask them to arrange local warnings over the radio on Channel 16 as a securit e message. Could you do that for us?’

‘Yes, sir. No sweat. I’d already spoken to the coastguard, so they’re expecting to hear from me.’

Hunter took his leave, went outside and climbed into the Land Rover. As he drove through the streets of Poole, on the A350, he briefed the other two.

‘This looks like it,’ Samson said, as they neared the front at Swanage, to be met by flashing blue lights and a number of people who turned out to be policemen, outnumbered three to one by the press.

The distinctive blue Land Rover, with the red painted panels was quickly waved past and allowed down to the jetty where Hunter stopped alongside what was commonly called a floating gin palace. He stood on the jetty, the deck of the boat just a few inches lower than his feet, and looked at the mine bobbing in the water. Somebody had taken the trouble to hang rubber fenders all around the boat and the jetty so that the mine had something soft to rub against. He could see immediately that it was indeed an old, German Second World War mine; a contact V type. The horns made it seem more deadly than it actually was, although it was still a dangerous piece of machinery which needed to be disposed of. He turned to the constable who had followed them down from the barrier. ‘Do you have the keys to the boat?’ he asked.

‘No, sir, we don’t, but the owner’s just returned and he’s probably got them with him.’

‘Ask him to come down. If he lends them to me, I’ll take this back to sea and blow it up. It won’t take me long if I do that.’

The constable walked quickly away, conferred with an individual standing by the cars and returned a few moments later with the man in tow.

‘This is Mr. Jessop. He’s the owner,’ the constable introduced the man.

‘Mr. Jessop,’ Hunter held out his hand to the short, podgy man standing in front of him. Jessop was about five feet three inches tall, was shaped like a pear with a big round stomach and had a bristling grey moustache which somehow fitted well with his bulbous nose. ‘I need to use your boat, I’m afraid,’ said Hunter pleasantly. ‘I intend to tow the mine back out and blow it up at sea. It’ll save a lot of...’

Before he could finish, Jessop said in a surprisingly deep, bass voice, ‘No chance. You take that thing off the back and let me take my boat back to the marina. I’ve never heard such nonsense, you borrowing my boat. I’ve done my bit fetching it in here. I’m damned if I’m going to let you inconvenience me any further. I had to stay at a local hotel last night, at my own expense, too. I can tell you I was not best pleased. No, not pleased at all.’

‘Look, Mr. Jessop. The easiest thing to do is to tow the damn mine back to sea where we can dispose of it. That gets life here back to normal as quickly as possible and means the minimum disruption for us, the police and the other services we’d need to involve if we tried anything else.’

‘That’s your problem,’ began Jessop, but before he could continue Hunter interrupted him.

‘I think not, Mr. Jessop. I’ll make it yours. I can have you booked for endangering the lives of the inhabitants of Swanage by towing that thing in here. Further, there is a risk of serious damage to the buildings around here,’ he waved his hand in the air, ‘and finally, there’s the disruption you’ve caused. Now, I’m willing to talk to the constabulary nicely and get them to ignore the dozen or so laws you’ve broken in exchange for your co-operation to resolve the trouble you’ve caused.’

‘Now look here. I’ve never heard such rot. I did my duty towing that thing in here away from the sea. I...’ he spluttered to a halt, as he looked up at Hunter who was shaking his head at him.

‘Tell him, constable,’ Hunter hoped the constable would play along with him.

‘Yes, sir. Well, it’s like this. It is a potential danger to property and life and, em, you could be laying yourself open to charges. But, em, if you help, I’ll see what I can do,’ he finished lamely.

Jessop looked from one to the other of them. ‘Oh, very well,’ he said ungraciously. ‘Here are the blasted keys. I wish I’d never set eyes on that blasted mine.’ He held the keys out which dangled from a small polystyrene apple float.

‘Thank you,’ said Hunter, taking them, careful not to let the sarcasm show. ‘I’ll be as quick as I can.’ He turned to the two leading seamen who had already taken

out various boxes and stood them on the Jetty. ‘Right lads, get the 56lbs. sinker and load it with the rest of the gear in the stern. I’ll start the engines and get her warmed up.’

He stood in front of an impressive array of dials and switches, aware that Jessop was standing watching him, not offering any assistance. A few seconds’ perusal told him all he needed to know. He inserted the key to the starboard engine, turned it half way and held it there for a full two minutes. This warmed up the diesel at the ignition point. The starboard engine was isolated from all other electrics on the ship so that there was no danger of the battery being run down so low that the engine could not start. Next, he pressed the starboard starter button. The diesel burst into life with a deep throated growl and spurt of smoke out of the stern. He now did the same with the port engine and it too burst into life. The engines then settled down to a muted, background throb. Next, he turned on the Decca which gave him their latitude and longitude, the echo sounder and the radio, which immediately started broadcasting a securit  message about an imminent explosion, due off St. Alban’s head and warning all traffic to keep clear - a bit premature he thought, with a grin.

‘All set, Delilah?’ He asked the leading seaman who had just put his head through the stern doorway.

‘Aye, aye, sir. We’re singled up - only a head rope and stern line holding us alongside. The mine seems okay as it is and we thought we’d keep it close until we’re away from the wall.’

‘I agree.’ Hunter opened the window on his left side and yelled up at the constable. ‘Let go the stern rope will you and once we’re pointing out a bit you can let go the bow.’

The constable did as he was asked and a few moments later the boat was moving very slowly, stern first, pushing the mine away from the jetty. Once clear, Hunter turned the wheel hard to starboard and put the port engine ahead, the starboard engine astern. The boat turned quickly and smoothly. He centred the wheel, whilst simultaneously moving the starboard engine from astern to ahead and the boat started forward, quickly picking up headway. He kept to a slow speed, but from the

speedometer it looked as if she was capable of moving very fast indeed. He resisted the temptation to shove the levers to maximum revs to see how fast she could go.

‘Nice boat, boss,’ said Lewis, as he and Samson came inside.

It was that. A Fairline 46, three luxury cabins to sleep in, two toilets with showers and a main cabin as big as the sitting room in his cottage. Hunter was on the port side of the living room, sitting at the control console, holding the wheel. On the starboard side was a well equipped and well stocked galley. Samson was busy opening and closing drawers and cupboards seeing what was there.

‘Delilah, see if you can make us a cup of tea or coffee, will you?’ Hunter suggested. The suggestion was correctly interpreted as an order.

Samson grinned. ‘No sweat, boss. All I have to do is plug in the electric kettle!’ With that, he began to find the things he needed.

‘Taff, go aft and check on the mine and make sure it’s riding okay.’

Lewis went out through the glass doors which made up the whole of the aft wall to the cabin and went onto the deck space outside. The deck well had a comfortable seat running around the stern, with a gateway in the middle. Lewis leant over and looked at the mine following closely behind in their wake. ‘No problem, boss,’ he called to Hunter.

By this time they were clear of Swanage, past Peveril Point and heading for Durlston Head. Hunter picked up the radio handset and transmitted on Channel 16, the emergency frequency and call up channel. ‘Coastguard this is Navy, over.’

‘Navy this is Coastguard. Channel One Two please, over.’

Hunter acknowledged the order and turned the dial to Channel 12. ‘Coastguard this is Navy, over.’

‘Navy, this is coastguard. I take it you’ve got the mine, over.’

‘Affirmative. We’re on the boat which dragged it into Swanage, called “The Overdraft”. I’m going to tow the mine out to St. Alban’s Head and a mile out to sea. I’ll use a sinker to hold the mine in place and strap enough plastic to it, to blow it to smithereens.’

‘Concur. The lifeboat is on it’s way and should be with you very soon. We’ll keep broadcasting the securit   message but quite frankly, there’s nothing within five miles of you, according to the radar. Those vessels we know about have all been told to stay clear so there shouldn’t be any problem. Over.’

‘Okay, thanks for that. I’ll patrol to the east once I’ve set the fuse. Over.’

‘Roger that. We’ll stay on twelve with you and keep this frequency clear. The lifeboat will do the same. Out.’

‘Roger, out,’ replied Hunter, and he hung up the handset.

A few seconds later he had engaged the auto pilot and was sitting in the captain’s chair, sipping a cup of coffee. He heard the lifeboat talking to the coastguard and looking aft suddenly saw the orange craft shoot around the point known as The Foreland. With full power she stormed towards them, leaving a wide, clear wake in the flat calm sea. Instead of radioing, the boat continued until it was alongside and Hunter and the coxswain could yell across to each other over a mere twenty feet of water. They agreed the patrol areas, waved at each other and as “The Overdraft” continued on her sedate passage the lifeboat turned sharply to port and continued rapidly to her station.

Thirty minutes later Hunter moved the throttles into neutral and let the boat drift to a halt in the water. Samson and Lewis had been getting the gear ready during the passage and were fully prepared as the boat drifted to a stop.

Hunter looked at the echo sounder and said, ‘It’s reading thirty five metres, so cut off forty five for good measure.’

Lewis took the thin, orange corelene rope and measured off roughly forty five metres in length. He tied one end to the 56lbs concrete sinker they’d brought and coiled the remainder on the deck. In the meantime Samson had been cutting the mine loose from the ropes holding it on the stern until there were only two short lengths left. One he tied off on the guard-rail, the other he used to tie a bowline in the end. He then tied the end of the sinker line to the bowline. Satisfied, he confirmed to Hunter, ‘Ready, boss.’

‘Okay. Lower the sinker over the side and cast off the mine.’ This was quickly done so that the mine was bobbing in the water just off the stern, now secured to the sea bed and by the line to the handrail. ‘Keep the mine in close while I rig the explosives,’ said Hunter to Lewis, who took hold of the rope at the guard-rail and pulled it tight. He climbed down onto the platform at the stern and took hold of one of the horns on the mine to steady it.

Quickly, but carefully, he took a sausage of white plastic explosive which Samson and Lewis had kneaded together, and pressed it onto the casing of the mine. He also put one lump, the size of a melon, right on the top. Next, he shoved three holes into the plastic explosive using a pencil and tied the electric timing device to one of the horns. This was connected to the three detonators so all he had to do now was insert the detonators into the plastic. As this would leave the whole apparatus primed and ready to go off, it was the last part of the operation. It was also the most dangerous. In deference to his enduring nightmare of being stranded with a “ticking bomb” but without means of rapid departure Hunter had left the boat engines running before climbing down to the stern platform.

He pushed the detonators home and tamped the PE around them. He turned the clock on the timer to fifteen minutes and climbed back into the boat. Lewis threw away the line he was holding and the boat began to drift slowly away with the tide. Hunter went into the cabin, seated himself at the console, engaged the engines and increased the revs. The Overdraft responded immediately and quickly drew away from the mine.

Once he could see the mine floating clear astern, he yelled to the other two, ‘Hold tight,’ and pushed the throttles all the way over.

The boat sank on her haunches, moved forward with a burst of speed and surge of power and accelerated rapidly, rising to the plane, leaving a wide wake behind her. Hunter turned the wheel a few degrees to starboard and took the boat in a wide arc. The indicator showed she was pushing thirty five knots, the wind whistling about them. The three of them exchanged rueful and childish grins of pleasure and then Hunter throttled back, let the boat drop down from the plane and watched the speed

bleed away rapidly to settle at ten knots. He estimated they were a mile away when he stopped the boat altogether and turned her to face the mine.

Hunter looked at his watch. Ten thirty five. Not bad progress so far. The usual morning mist was beginning to form on the surface of the sea, causing the mine to drift in and out of sight. Too late, he thought of tying a flag or something to it to make it more visible. He stood up, stretched his limbs and then bent to open one of their boxes of gear. From it, Hunter took out a pair of binoculars and said, 'I'm going up to the fly deck to keep an eye on things. Answer the radio if anybody calls.'

'Who're you expecting, boss? The Duchess of Kent?'

Hunter made no reply. Sometimes naval humour passed him by. In the few minutes it had taken him to get organised and get to the open steering position above the main cabin more mist had begun to appear. This was typical of the south coast in spring; a cold night, followed by a flat calm and clear day usually resulted in a sea mist which would last until the afternoon by which time the sun would have burnt it off.

The sound of the diesels was a muted, background noise, hardly impinging on his conscience. He was looking at his watch and estimating that they had about two and a half minutes to go when the high pitched call of a young voice carried clearly to him. He looked up startled, unsure from which direction the sound was coming. Quickly he raised his glasses, looked for the mine and began to scan right then left. To look at him no one would have been aware of the frantic thoughts tumbling across his mind.

Now he got the meaning. 'Suzie, close up and we'll tie a piece of rope between us so that we don't lose each other.'

There, got them! The two sea kayaks drifted into his vision for a few seconds before being enveloped once again by the mist. Hunter had rammed the throttles fully home and was turning the wheel even as he yelled at the others. 'Delilah, Taff.' Down below he heard something smash, muffled curses and a great thump as if a body had dropped onto the deck.

A black face appeared over the deck. 'Christ, boss! What the hell's happening?'

‘Kids in kayaks. They’re about fifty yards from the mine and heading towards it.’ By now the boat was up on it’s plane, the speed indicator showing thirty eight knots. By a fluke the mine floated clearly in his vision fifty yards to port as he pulled the throttles back, bringing the beautiful craft to a rapid stop. He couldn’t see the kayaks but heard a plaintive voice yell in protest. ‘Hey, you clown, couldn’t you see?’ The mist had parted and the two kayaks were five yards away, four frightened and indignant faces looking up at him. It had taken a minute and forty five seconds from first hearing the voices to get this near. He hoped they had more than the forty five seconds that he estimated was all they had left to get away again.

‘Pull them in Taff, as quick as you can.’ Hunter yelled at the kids. ‘There’s a mine about to blow which will blow you all to Kingdom Come. Get aboard, hurry.’ Even as he was speaking Hunter was manoeuvring “The Overdraft” alongside the kayaks. Already two of the kids were clambering aboard, a third was grabbing the rail and the fourth...the fourth was just sitting there. ‘What the hell,’ even as Hunter began to speak, the youth was crossing his arms and saying, ‘Yeah, and pigs fly. I don’t know...’ the words were hardly out of his mouth when a big, black hand grabbed him by the front of his life jacket and bodily pulled him into the boat, dropping him onto the deck. Hunter missed the protests and squeals from his new passengers as he was already ramming home the throttles, turning the boat to starboard to present a stern aspect to the mine. He glanced at his watch, an old Rolex Oyster Perpetual and realised that they were now on borrowed time.

Mentally he did the arithmetic. At thirty eight knots the boat travelled three point eight nautical miles in six minutes. In thirty seconds they had travelled point three...even as he was working it out the explosion began.

The electric timer moved the last thousandth of an inch and completed the circuit, fifteen seconds later than estimated. The tiny battery generated enough power to cause an electric current to travel along two short pieces of wire to the detonators taped to the white detonating cord. These ignited the cord and a controlled explosion ran along their lengths in a nano-second. Although they were cut to the same lengths, setting an explosion like this is not an exact science. The explosion running along the

detonating cord reached the main detonators hundredths of seconds apart. It made no difference. The detonators exploded, which in turn caused the molecules of the plastic explosive to be thrown apart with a violence that was devastating. Because the plastic explosive had been shaped like a bar of Toblerone chocolate and the melon sized lump in the shape of a pyramid, most of the explosive force was directed into the mine. The mine casing blew inwards and such was the violence of the explosion, the old, decayed explosive held in the mine, after nearly seventy years since manufacture, performed the task for which it had been made and blew up.

The blast tore apart the mist, threw a huge gusher of water into the air and scattered small bits of metal in all directions. Luckily none of the casing travelled more than two hundred yards, the water only a few yards further but the blast spread out from its epi-centre carrying all before it. Birds were thrown though the air, some dead, others only stunned. The pressure wave moved out in concentric rings and hit the stern of the boat with sufficient force to throw those who had been standing in the well deck off their feet. The large plate glass window doors shattered inwards but luckily none of the glass did any serious damage. The thump of the explosion travelled through the water and hit the hull with a crump that caused the boat to lift her stern about a foot before settling back to flee any further damage. Hunter was shoved hard against the wheel, the breath knocked from him, but he kept his feet.

He looked back to see the water cascading down and everything returning to normal. Already the mist was re-forming, partly obliterating his view. He throttled back and began to turn the boat. ‘Are you all okay?’ he yelled.

There was a chorus of yesses and more muffled curses, before Lewis put his head over the deck edge. ‘Fraid there’s a bit of a mess below, sir. But apart from that everybody seems all right.’

‘Okay. Tell those kids that if they want to keep an eye out for their kayaks we’ll take them back with us if we can find them.’ He then left the wheel and darted below to take over back in the main cabin. Once he had control there he lifted the handset and broadcast, ‘Lifeboat, this is “The Overdraft”, over.’

‘Overdraft, this is lifeboat. That was some explosion. Are you all right? We watched you on our radar suddenly move, stop and then go like a bat out of hell.’

‘Yeah, sorry if we gave you heart failure but it was nothing compared to what we felt. We had to pick up four kids in kayaks who had strayed into the area, over.’

‘Jesus, where the hell did they come from? Over.’

‘I don’t know yet. I haven’t had a chance to question them. Look, we’re right in the middle of the blast here and the sea is covered in fish. I can’t be bothered to stay and collect it so why don’t you come in and lift what you want? Over.’

‘Thanks Navy that’s mighty nice of you. See you again. Roger, out.’

‘This is “The Overdraft”. Like our American cousins say, have a nice day. Switching to Channel 16. Out.’ Even as he had been speaking, he had manoeuvred the boat alongside the two kayaks which were still intact and tied together.

Samson and Lewis pulled them aboard and put them on the forward deck which was large enough to accommodate a dozen sun bathing bodies should the weather be fine enough. Hunter engaged the gears and headed back to Swanage.

‘Boss, you aren’t going to believe this,’ said Delilah, his feet crunching on the glass scattered across the cabin, a big grin on his face.

‘Believe what?’ asked Hunter, already distracted with how he was going to get out of any problem which Jessop could throw at him. If he’d read the man correctly he’d enjoy causing a stir about the damage.

‘The young lady says this is her father’s boat and wants to know what we’re doing with it.’

Hunter was startled, curious and relieved all at the same time. Startled at the news, curious as to what she and the others were doing out there so early and relieved that in view of what had happened Jessop was hardly going to cause a fuss.

Hunter looked over leading seaman Samson’s shoulder at the girl standing just behind him. She was looking a little woebegone and white around the gills but seemed to have a lot of spirit still in her.

‘Is this true? This is your father’s boat?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. My name’s Lucy Jessop and this is his boat all right.’

Hunter nodded. ‘Jessop is the owner’s name so I guess she’s yours after all. At least if we’ve saved his daughter I don’t suppose he’ll make too much fuss about the mess.’ He waved his hand airily about the cabin. The double doors had shattered into tiny pieces of glass, just like a car windscreen would, and were scattered all over the place.

She looked pensive for a moment and said, surprisingly, ‘I think it would be a good idea to get my mother to meet us. I don’t trust Dad.’

Hunter let her comment pass him and asked, ‘What were you doing out there anyway?’

Lucy pursed her lips, thought a moment and replied, ‘We were on a kayaking trip for our Duke of Edinburgh’s Gold Award. This was the only time we could fit in because we’ve got “A Levels” coming up.’

‘That explains it. But where did you come from?’

One of the others, a boy with sandy hair, a thin face and a gangling body, appeared next to her and said, ‘We started yesterday morning. We’d already done twenty miles when we stopped last night and camped on a beach. We left this morning at first light. Hell, we only had about fifteen miles to go and now this. I suppose we’ll have to do it all over again.’

The other two were sitting outside and heard him. Both groaned and commented on the unfairness of it. The boy who had been bodily dragged into the boat suddenly stood up.

‘I’m sorry I made such a prat of myself. If I was honest I’d admit to having been frightened. When you appeared like that, it scared the life out of me. I wondered what in the world was going on,’ he finished lamely, shrugged and looked sheepish.

Hunter smiled encouragingly at them all. ‘Don’t worry about it. I can understand.’

They were already approaching Swanage and Hunter turned his attention back to taking the boat alongside the stone jetty. ‘Eh, Lucy, what did you mean when you said to get hold of your mother and not to trust your father?’

‘Exactly that. I can tell you that he will be furious because of the damage to his precious boat,’ she replied with some bitterness. ‘He demands rights which, if the truth were known, aren’t there. He can be a serious embarrassment sometimes.’ She spoke with the candour of youth and experience. Suddenly she smiled. ‘Oh look, there’s mummy now, standing on the jetty.’ Lucy went out on deck and waved excitedly to her mother.

Hunter was concentrating on taking the boat safely alongside but managed to catch a glimpse of an attractive woman he guessed to be in her late thirties.

Lucy was busy telling her mother how they came to be onboard the boat as Hunter stopped alongside the jetty and ropes were thrown up to people awaiting their return.

Lucy scrambled ashore to hug her mother even as her father was jumping onboard. ‘What the f...What...What. What have you done, you bastard!’ Jessop was beside himself with rage. His face had turned a mottled red colour and he was moving up and down on his toes, as though trying to make himself taller. His hands hung by his sides, opening and closing as though he was unable to make up his mind about making a fist and taking a swing at Hunter.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ Hunter began. ‘But...’

‘Sorry! You incompetent fool. I’ll have you court martialled for this. You had no right to take my boat in the first place and you return it like this. I’m going to have your guts for garters, I promise you!’

Unknown to either of the men, Lucy and her mother had climbed onboard. ‘Daddy, that’s unfair. He saved my life and the lives of the others. If he hadn’t come back for us...’

‘Keep out of this,’ Jessop almost snarled at his daughter. ‘I’ll deal with you later. Now, you...’he swung back to Hunter but before he could say another word his wife grabbed hold of his arm, above the elbow and shook it.

‘Shut up, shut up, shut up. You’re a bloody fool Arthur so don’t say another word and try not to make a bigger fool of yourself than you have already. Lieutenant, I apologise for this buffoon of a husband of mine, but he over-reacts all the time.’

Jessop was looking at his wife dazedly, never having been so publicly put down by her before. He quickly recovered and shook her hand off his arm. ‘Doreen, I’ll speak to you later as well. I won’t have my wife speak to me like that in front of other...’

Doreen Jessop lost her temper in such a way that would redefine the Jessop’s relationship forever. She took hold of his shoulder and pushed and shoved him down the four steps that led to the forward cabins, yelling, ‘Get in there and be quiet. These men saved Lucy’s life at the risk of their own and you haven’t got the good grace to admit it. The whole fiasco was your fault in the first place. I told you not to drag that thing in here but to call the coastguard.’ Whatever else she was saying became muffled as she closed the door separating the forward master cabin from the rest of the boat. Only her voice could be heard with an occasional word being understood. After a few minutes there was an interruption by Jessop, quickly followed by the distinct noise of a face being slapped. The door was flung open and Doreen Jessop stalked out and back up the steps to the main saloon. Her colour was high but, Hunter admitted to himself, she looked very, very attractive. She immediately composed herself and stopped in front of him.

Her big, hazel coloured eyes looked into Nick’s dark blue ones and she held out her hand. She was breathing heavily and the white blouse she was wearing under her unbuttoned jacket was straining at the seams. Hunter could not help glancing down at her cleavage, a glance she noted and smiled at. ‘If there is anything, anything at all,’ she took his hand and held it a few moments longer than necessary, ‘that I can do, please do not hesitate to call. You’ll find us in the telephone book for Arundel.’ She let go his hand but her eyes held his steadily. ‘I want to thank you for what you did today. You saved my daughter’s life,’ Doreen broke eye contact, moved a step and put her arm around Lucy’s shoulders, ‘and the lives of the others. I cannot thank you enough.’

Hunter nodded and smiled. ‘All in a day’s work. Lads, get the gear up top and let’s get going.’

A few minutes later they bade their farewells. Unknown to either of them, they would meet again, under very different circumstances.